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GOD’S BEAUTIFUL MISSION:
MISSIONAL CHURCH AND LEADERSHIP IN THE LIGHT
OF THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

by
M. SCOTT BOREN

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2018

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ABSTRACT

God's Beautiful Mission

by

M. Scott Boren

This project seeks to ascertain how pastoral leaders who have been trained in missional theology have led in a way that has been influenced by theological aesthetics. The view of missional leadership here is built upon a re-imagination of *missio Dei* and missional church that is informed by theological aesthetics. This theology of beauty is based upon the work of Gregory A. Boyd, Jonathan Edwards, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This proposal seeks to advance the views of the missional church rooted in the work of Lesslie Newbigin and advanced by Craig Van Gelder, Alan Roxburgh, and Pat Keifert.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I live in two worlds vocationally. In one, I find myself surrounded by people like Jonathan Edwards, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, T. F. Torrance, Hans urs von Balthasar and other theologians who have left parts of themselves in books that sit in my library. Also in this world are living thinkers of the church whom I have had the opportunity to know personally. These include the likes of Greg Boyd, Paul Eddy, Craig Van Gelder, Alan Torrance, and Gordon Fee. I am grateful for the investment these have made in my life and in this theological world that has shaped what I say here. More specifically, to Greg Boyd, thank you for the opportunity to live inside your theology and for your contribution to the final stage of this project.

The other vocational world is that of ministry leadership. Sadly, it seems that the theological world tends to orbit in a different solar system than the ministry world. I have sought to merge the two. I have been influenced by many who have pushed me to ask hard questions about how my theological world actually plays out in the life of the church. These include Alan Roxburgh, David Fitch, Ralph W. Neighbour Jr., Bill Beckham, Joel Comiskey, Jim Egli, and Dwight Marable. I could not have written this thesis without the many conversations over the years. My gratitude grows as I reflect on the privilege of walking this journey with them.

To Dan Anderson and Alvin Luedke, thank you for the countless hours you have invested in directing our Doctor of Ministry cohort. This project would not be possible

without your guidance. In addition, the feedback of the cohort is what led to the question asked in this thesis in the first place. The conversations, along with a couple of serendipitous comments, sparked this idea and launched me down an unexpected path.

To the four pastors who participated in this study, I am honored that you opened up your imagination about God, church, and leadership and allowed me to peek into the beauty that God has fostered in your midst.

To my children, Afton, Jenson, Gavin, and Deklan, it is my great joy to observe the beauty that you bring into the world. You light up every room you enter, and you make me want to wrestle all the more with what it means for God's people to manifest beauty. And thank you Deklan for your work on the illustrations included in this thesis.

To my wife, Shawna. You light up my life with a beauty that cannot be put into words. Our journey has had more than its fair share of unexpected twists, however, with each one, you have cast a glow that brings new light and new hope. Thank you for sharing this journey with me.

Finally, to the Father-Son-Spirit, thank you for opening my eyes to perceive your life, your beauty. May you be glorified through these words and may your church flourish.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers an introductory proposal for how theological aesthetics can open new ways of interpreting the theology of *missio Dei*, resulting in the reimagining and advancing the meaning and practice of both missional church and missional leadership. To this point, missional ecclesiology has been explicated along the lines of truth (logic) and goodness (ethics), while the language of beauty (aesthetics) has, most often, been relegated to a utilitarian role. Beauty, in other words, has been a means for accomplishing the ends of truth and goodness and has not served as an end in and of itself. This project explores the possibilities that theological aesthetics opens and therefore sets initial parameters for further study. The questions about the relationship between theological aesthetics and various topics of what it means to be and to lead the missional church are vast to say the least.

In this opening chapter, I explore the relationship between church and mission, and I propose that this relationship has been addressed through the transcendentals of truth and goodness. Then I explain the question raised in this research project and introduce the way I sought to develop a viable answer to it.

Church and Mission

Church and mission go hand in glove, a claim that has been exhaustively espoused by theologians over the last century. These words penned by Emil Brunner

eighty-five years ago illustrate this point, “The Church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith.”¹ In the 1950s, Lesslie Newbigin proclaimed that, “the Church can exist without being a mission involves a radical contradiction of the truth of the Church’s being, and no recovery of the true wholeness of the Church’s nature is possible without a recovery of its radically missionary character.”² More recently, Carl Braatan confessed, “A church without mission or a mission without the church are both contradictions. A missionary church and a missionary theology go hand in hand.”³ Depending upon the specific church tradition, the question of mission and its relationship to the church has been raised and answered in a plethora of ways, however, a broadly-accepted conclusion across theological traditions is that the church is missional according to its ontology. As David Bosch announced in his magnum opus in the oft-quoted claim, “Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is a church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.”⁴ This wide-spread adoption of this theological claim is illustrated by the book *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation*. While the specific theological perspectives vary, each

¹ Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1931), 108.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 148.

³ Carl E. Braaten, *That All May Believe: A Theology of the Gospel and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 147.

⁴ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

representative of these five views espouses that “[t]he church does not merely send missionaries; rather, the church itself is God’s missionary people. Mission becomes the defining character of the church as the reflection of the divine character of God as a missionary God.”⁵

The missional ontology of the church is rooted in the theology of *missio Dei*, the God who is missional in divine being is at work in the world to redeem all things.⁶ Because God is missional in God’s nature, so too is the church. The missional church is based in the life and work of the missional God. In concrete terms of a lived theology, this can be viewed in contrast to the lived theology held by previous generations where mission and church operated in two distinct domains. The “church” domain encompassed cultures where the gospel was established with the purpose of cultivating the faith of those within those cultures, and the “mission” domain pertained to cultures where the gospel had yet to be established with the purpose of proclaiming the truth of the gospel. As a result, the being of the church was divided from mission, which became a secondary act apart from what the church is. This division, which was developed within the Christendom worldview, became the established lived theology for centuries, along with corresponding teachings, performances, and practices that shape this imagination.⁷

⁵ Craig Ott, *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), xix.

⁶ The history and meaning of the theology of *missio Dei* is complex. This is thoroughly explored in John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

⁷ While there are a variety of manifestations Christendom in the history of the church—as is illustrated by the differences between that which developed in Western Europe and that which developed in North America—the broad-based definition of Christendom that I am using is the alignment of church with the ruling authorities of particular governments. John Howard Yoder writes, “Whether Catholic or Protestant, churches generally identified themselves with the power structures of their respective societies instead of seeing their duty as that of calling these powers to modesty and resisting their recurrent

Over the last two decades, this teaching of the missionary nature of the church has diffused from the discipline of biblical and systematic theology into the discipline of practical or lived theology, influencing conversations about pastoral leadership, church structures, and ecclesial practices. As such, one might argue that the missional church is not only *true* from a transcendental point of view, but also it has shifted to incorporate the transcendental of *goodness* as it has been made actionable and useful in such a way that the theory of missional church has become an innovation⁸ that has been diffused through church systems. Innovation as it relates to missional church occurs on two levels. First, there is the diffusion of the innovation of missional church language, as illustrated by the popularization of the language where the words mission and church are combined, including missional church,⁹ missionary congregation, mission-shaped church,¹⁰ missional community,¹¹ and God's missionary people.¹² At the tipping point of this

rebellion,” John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 142.

⁸ An innovation is “[a]n idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.” This is distinct from an invention, where the idea or product is new. “It matters little, so far as human behavior is concerned, whether or not an idea is objectively new as measured by the lapse of time since its first use or discovery. The perceived newness of the idea for the individual determines his or her reaction to it. If the idea seems new to the individual, it is an innovation,” Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 11. Missional church is an innovation, not an invention because it is not new, but based in the eternal being of God, not in the development of a human inventor's ability to construct a new concept.

⁹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

¹⁰ Graham Cray and Mission and Public Affairs Council (Church of England), *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions in a Changing Context*, 2nd ed., Mission-Shaped Series (NY: Seabury Books, 2010).

¹¹ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

¹² Charles Edward van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

movement from the realm of theology into church practice—at least in North America—was the publication of *Missional Church* in 1998,¹³ which resulted in a variety of experiments regarding what it means to speak, practice, and perform the missional ontology of the church.¹⁴ The second level occurs as a lived theology which results in a “modification of the ‘rules of the game’ so that church develops in new ways”¹⁵ that are integrated in a new, adaptive context. At this second level, the innovation of missional church pertains to the way church is expressed, performed, and practiced.

The ability to lead the diffusion of an innovation through a system—whether a local church, a regional network of churches, or a denomination—thereby moving it from a theoretical concept into an experienced reality, is related to the three philosophical transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. The innovation must be perceived by potential adopters as reasonable and understandable (truthful), useful and actionable (good), and desirable and compelling (beautiful). Pastoral leaders must develop the skills to guide others to see the value of the innovation in these three transcendentals. When one surveys the literature on the lived theology of missional church (see chapter two), one could easily argue that it has been established as both true and good, however, the question of the third transcendental, beauty, has not been an overt part of the

¹³ Darrell L. Guder et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁴ For a survey of the historical development of the theology of the missional church see Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 17-65.

¹⁵ Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life: Emergence, Ecclesiology and Entrepreneurship* (London: SCM Press, 2017), 8.

conversation.¹⁶ The missional church is true and good, but it is also beautiful, and whether pastors, local church leaders, and the church membership are able to perceive this beauty is crucial to the further diffusion of this innovation. If, on the other hand, those communicating what it means to be a missional church only express it as true and good, then its diffusion will be limited.¹⁷

Research Question

Before specifically addressing questions of beauty as it relates to the missional church, first we must clarify the language of the truth and goodness of the missional church. This is a complex issue because, in the midst of the widespread theological agreement regarding the missionary nature of the church, the lived theology of missional church has much less consensus.¹⁸ While missional church thought leaders who influence

¹⁶ The one book that may appear to speak to the question of the relationship of theological aesthetics and mission is *So Beautiful* by Leonard Sweet. A brief analysis of this title can help clarify how introducing theological aesthetics into the missional church conversation is distinct. Sweet identifies the design of the church as a three-fold pattern of missional, relational, and incarnational, each of which correspondingly contrasts with established church patterns of attractional, propositional, and colonial. While observations about the church made by the author offer constructive contributions to the missional church conversation, the argument of the book does not explicate the missional church from the perspective of beauty. Instead, the book proposes that mission is one of three traits of a beautiful church. It works from mission to beauty, not from the revelation of beauty to mission. Therefore, for Sweet, “missional is God’s ‘Go,’” Leonard I. Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church: Missional, Relational, Incarnational* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 30. Mission is defined as “sentness” (62). This sentness then is applied to what it might mean for the church to be beautiful and is set in contrast to an attractional mode of ecclesial operation. While not offering a critique of Sweet’s view of mission, this project takes a different approach. Instead of beginning with a characteristic of the church, it roots beauty in the revelation of God and then moves to what this revelation might mean for the church. As a result, the movement from divine beauty to ecclesial beauty expands the understanding of mission beyond that of sentness, while at the same time including sentness. It takes the focus off of the fact that the church is sent and puts it on the God who was and is being sent, and therefore it reveals the way that the church participates in this sentness.

¹⁷ Diffusion of an innovation is limited when it is not perceived as compelling or beautiful not simply because its transcendental value is not seen. Seeing an innovation’s beauty motivates a person to take the risk of letting go of the status quo and experiment with a new idea. This will be further explored in chapter three.

¹⁸ “Lived theology” is related to the philosophical practice of “practical reasoning,” of which I simply mean rational thought that is connected to our action. Oliver O’Donovan states that “practical

the conversation at the level of church leadership and practice might use very similar theological language, the practical strategies that they promote reveal a lived theology that has far greater disparity in meaning than the common theological language might suggest. This diversity is illustrated by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile in their book *The Missional Church in Perspective*, which organizes the use of missional church language into a taxonomy of four branches and ten sub-branches.¹⁹ The four primary branches of Discovering, Utilizing, Engaging, and Extending organizes the missional church literature that has developed since the publication of the landmark book *Missional Church*. The following provides a basic introduction to these branches.

Discovering Missional: Those who espouse this view tend to emphasize a traditional view of the Great Commission while also recognizing the call of the church to be sent into the world. The primary distinctive of this branch seems to be the claim that the location of the church is at the center of God's work in the world. The word "discovering" is used because the authors perceive these works as still in the process of discovering the themes found in *Missional Church*.

Utilizing Mission: The publications found in this category are those that use the meaning of missional—specifically the theological theme of the sending God—and apply it to the church. However, they fall short of embracing the theology found in *Missional*

thought is the most commonplace of human rational exercises, for action is the first and elementary horizon of human existence," Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, Ethics as Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 3. The discipline of practical reasoning forces one to make connections between theory and how we live, and in this case, how we practice church. Charles Marsh writes, "[L]ived theology is an apt expression for the foregrounding of embodied particularity in theological narrative. Lived theology then pursues both a descriptive and an edifying purpose: namely, that of keeping narrative space open to the actions of God in experience, and understanding the social consequences of theological ideas," Charles Marsh, *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

¹⁹ Van Gelder and Zscheile, 70.

Church because the focus lies on human activity regarding how to organize the church as opposed to embracing God's work of the Spirit in the people of God to innovate new ways of practicing church.

Engaging Missional: This branch of resources does not enter into the theological argument of missional. Instead they seek to explore the implications of the missional theology proposed in *Missional Church* as it relates to various dimensions of church life.

Extending Missional: The works cited here are those that seek to expand the conversional into new paths, venturing—primarily theologically—along constructive paths regarding the meaning and application of missional to the life of the church.²⁰

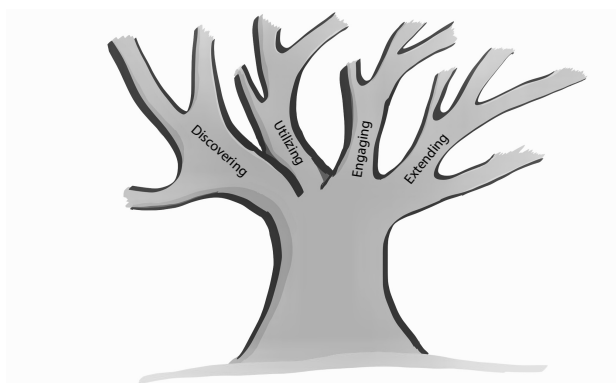


Figure 1: Branches of Missional Church

Within Van Gelder's and Zscheile's Extending Branch, they name a sub-branch called "Deepening Our Understanding of Missional" to identify literature that develops the meaning of missional church.²¹ This project aims to fall in line with this sub-branch by introducing theological aesthetics into the conversation so as to ascertain the influence of this discipline upon the diffusion of the innovation of missional church. The basic question this project seeks to answer reads:

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Ibid., 91.

How has theological aesthetics informed the way missional pastors lead?

I began the project with the intention to research how pastors who have been shaped by the view of missional church as participation in triune mission are communicating this perspective to their key leaders within local congregations. This initial question shifted as I began to recognize the need to ascertain how these pastors were utilizing beauty in order to communicate this view of the missional church. This led to the question: How are pastors who have been shaped by the missional hermeneutic of triune participation communicating this vision in beautiful and compelling ways to key leaders? However, as I engaged the literature on theological aesthetics, the key question—from a theological point of view—is not how beauty can be utilized to promote the missional church. Instead, when theological aesthetics is brought into the conversation with missional ecclesiology, the question must be rooted in how God's beauty is shaping what it means to communicate, practice, and perform a missional church.

Therefore, from the perspective of theological aesthetics, the beauty of missional leadership employed for the sake of innovation diffusion correlates with the beauty of that leader's vision for missional church. In turn, the beauty of one's vision for missional church correlates with the beauty of *missio Dei*. Missional God, missional church, and missional leadership run parallel to one another. Theological aesthetics, being a discipline of the imagination, informs the imagination through which pastors lead, which is directly dependent upon the imagination that they possess of *missio Dei* and missional church. Therefore, in order to answer the question about how theological aesthetics has informed the way missional pastors lead, we must ascertain how theological aesthetics has

informed the *telos* of the missional church. Or more simply stated, what is the imagination of the end that leaders are moving toward? We might illustrate it this way:

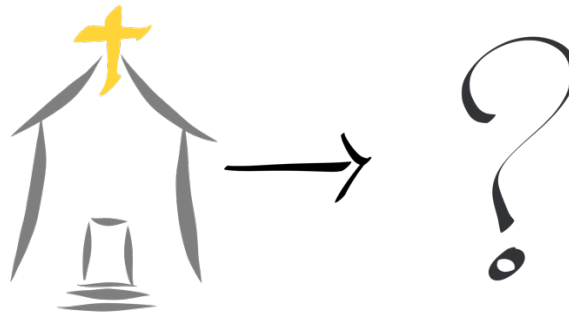


Figure 2: Questioning the Telos of Missional Church

Because of the diverse usage of the missional church language, the question asked is directed at a specific perspective of missional church thinking and pastoral leadership, that is proposed in the work of Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, called “participating in triune mission.”²² This perspective sets a rich and fertile stage for exploring how theological aesthetics influenced pastors who have led their churches into this perspective of missional church. The support for focusing on this specific theology of the missional church will be offered in chapter five.

By discovering the degree to which pastoral leaders have been shaped by theological aesthetics and how this has informed their leadership, I have identified fresh ways to express the meaning and *telos* of the missional church (chapter seven) as well as key leadership roles that promote this *telos* (chapter eight). The proposals of these two chapters are offered as a means to promote the diffusion of the innovation of missional

²² See *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017). Others who have espoused this theological perspective include Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006); Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2015); John R. Franke, "Contextual Mission: Bearing Witness to the Ends of the Earth," in *Four Views on the Church's Mission*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

church as participation in triune mission through church systems by promoting its truth, goodness, and beauty.

Variables

The independent variable of this exploratory research project is theological aesthetics. The dependent variable is simple: What roles do pastors adopt to guide the church to participate in the beauty of God’s mission? The hypothesis of this project is that this broad-based dependent variable can be broken down into three parts. The first relates to the Poetics used to communicate missional church. I use the word “poetics”—as opposed to a word like “language”—in order to identify not only the specific words used but also the creative expression of those words, along with other forms of evocative communication. The second is about the nature of the Performance of beauty in their leadership. The third pertains to how they foster spiritual Practices that promote the beauty of God.

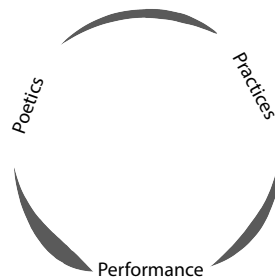


Figure 3: Poetics, Performance, Practices

The goal of this project is to identify the interactive trialogue between Poetics, Performance, and Practices²³ that has been influenced by theological aesthetics and

²³ Note: I capitalize these words through this work in order to differentiate when one of these words is used to specify the variables of this project.

thereby name the leadership roles that pastors can adopt to promote the beauty of the missional church.

The organization of these dependent variables is built upon a proposal for understanding the missional church by Alan Roxburgh found in *Introducing the Missional Church*, which I co-authored with him.²⁴ There, we introduced the image of a missional river comprised of the Memory of God's narrative work in the world, the Mystery that God works through a chosen people, and the Mission that engages a hurting world. In a similar way, Diana Butler Bass, in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, offers a circular triad between Tradition (another way of talking about Memory), Wisdom (correlating with Mystery) and Practices (a practical way of talking about Mission), which serves as a complimentary image about the way that we imagine church.²⁵ These two titles offer a way of understanding the missional church that serves as a seedbed for integrating theological aesthetics. They both operate from an unstated presumption that the way one communicates a theology and vision for the church involves much more than the articulation of verbal or written concepts. Let me illustrate from common life by contrasting the vision for a free-market economics with communist economics.

Free-market capitalism is shaped by an overarching narrative that defines the Poetics of how those within the free-market system tell the story of what it means to live within that system. This is the Tradition (Bass) or Memory (Roxburgh). It also is shaped by a Performance, a way of relating to self and others (in the case of the free-market it is

²⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009).

²⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 52-53.

a Performance defined by competition). This is the Wisdom (Bass) or Mystery (Roxburgh) that shapes unspoken rules for how things operate in that system. In addition, those in the free-market system live according to a set of Practices (Bass) that shape its aims or Mission (Roxburgh). If someone was raised in a communist country, they would have a different Poetics, a different Performance with others, and a different set of Practices.

I modify the language of Roxburgh and Bass to reflect a similar three-fold conversation by using the words Poetics, Performance, and Practices. The communication of a new idea—like that of missional church as triune participation—is not merely about conveying truth of theological concepts; nor is it merely about discipling people to live into the goodness of God’s mission. Poetics, Performance, and Practices are about the beauty of the form of missional church, that which evokes, stirs, and instills the imagination to live into the fullness of the beauty that defines who God is.

The goal of this way of organizing the lenses is to advance the conversation of the meaning of the missional church so that it can be further clarified and translated and thereby more readily understood and embraced by key leaders within a congregation. However, the more significant goal is to ascertain how the introduction of beauty might reframe common understandings of *missio Dei*, missional church and missional leadership.

Of course, there are intervening variables that affect the degree to which local theological aesthetics has influenced the Poetics, Practices, and Performance of leaders as they guide their churches into God’s mission. The first is the degree to which a pastoral leader has been influenced by theological aesthetics. The writings in this field are quite

obscure and, for the most part, they do not play an overt part in pastoral training because theological education has primarily operated within the transcendentals of truth and goodness since the age of Enlightenment. However, two things should be considered. First, this branch of theology is growing in influence, as the writings—while often difficult to comprehend—are increasing. Second, beauty is a part of good living and therefore it is part of good leadership. Even if a leader has not been trained in the field of theological aesthetics, one can still measure the degree to which they have integrated beauty into the way that they lead.

A second intervening variable is the leadership situation of those I studied. No innovation is written on a *tabula rasa*. The reality of the situation in which these pastors lead influences how they lead. For instance, the previous experiences with various approaches to missional church—whether positive or negative—will influence one's ability to adopt a new imagination.

Related to this is the intervening variable of the sense of urgency that a church has with regard to the state of the church at this point in history.²⁶ Those who do not have a sense of urgency are not as likely to be open to a new imagination about the church and therefore find missional church less compelling. In addition, the amount of time a pastor has to give to this endeavor will shape how they convey this vision. Beauty, imagination, and creativity take time. It does not come in canned or pre-packaged propaganda developed by other churches or within publishing houses.

²⁶ John P. Kotter, *A Sense of Urgency* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008).

Importance of the Research Question

The popular Christian writer and counselor, Larry Crabb, wrote a book in 2009 entitled *Real Church*, where he named the lived theology that shapes his hopes for church life. While his book is highly anecdotal, his observations about the missional church illustrate why this question is so vital. He writes, “I’m not yet ready to be part of a missional church and, I think, in part, for good reason. I have concerns that keep me from jumping on the missional train that is carrying Christian soldiers into the world to change it, deploying its troops to bring heaven’s kingdom into this Satan-infested planet.” He then expresses his concerns about churches that become “a zealous bunch of God-talking humanitarian do-gooders.”²⁷ These comments illustrate three reasons why the question I am raising in this project is crucial.

The first reason is a direct derivative of Crabb’s comments. Many pastoral leaders who are committed to the church and to the communication of the gospel in our world adopt so-called missional-church strategies based on the truthfulness and the goodness of God’s missional being. Because God is a missionary God, they conclude that being a missionary church is both reasonable and useful. It is reasonable because it can be argued both theologically and biblically, and it is useful because the church finds itself where it must be missional or it will die.²⁸ To be on mission with God, as a result, becomes a principle that the church applies as a duty or an obligation. Participation in the *missio Dei*

²⁷ Larry Crabb, *Real Church: Does It Exist? Can I Find It?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 126-27.

²⁸ The idea of “reasonable” and “useful” is adapted from Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 27-29. While he applies these categories to theological ethics, there is a correlation with the lived theology of missional church, as adopting this innovation becomes something that we must do from a theological perspective or we are forced to do so from a practical perspective. Either way, the pressure falls upon the church to perform the mission.

then is about performing God's mission according to a "try harder" mentality. The work of mission is not inherently beautiful as it falls back on the shoulders of Christians who look like "a zealous bunch of God-talking humanitarian do-gooders," and many end up exhausted from doing the mission that was taught to them to be both reasonable (true) and useful (good). In addition, Christian leaders in their aim to be faithful to the call to move the church into *missio Dei* end up forcing people in that direction, often using guilt, shame, and manipulation because they agree with the theological claims that the church is missional in its nature. This, I would argue, is the natural path to take if our view of *missio Dei* and missional church is devoid of theological aesthetics. However, God is also beautiful, and if this is the case, then the *missio Dei*, and derivatively the missional ontology of the church and missional leadership, is beautiful. While people might be initially convinced by the truth and goodness of missional church, they will remain invested in it to the degree that they perceive its beauty. More fundamentally, the missional church will only reflect the beauty of God to the degree that its vision of God is shaped by divine beauty. Crabb's words illustrate that either the beauty of the missional church has not been expressed in what he was observing or that he did not perceive it.

The second reason is an indirect derivative of Crabb's observations. His words illustrate the lack of clarity regarding the meaning of missional church and therefore the relative obscurity of what it means to lead others into God's mission. While Crabb is by no means a trained missiologist nor an expert in ecclesiology, he is a disciplined and studious communicator who does not throw around words with frivolity. His comments about the meaning of missional church demonstrate how easy it is to misunderstand the language of missional church when it comes to a lived theological expression. Crabb is

referring to one stream of missional church thought, but it is far from representative of other perspectives. In my work as a leadership coach and church consultant, initial conversations with a pastoral leader inevitably bump against different ways of understanding missional church. While coaching a large church in Texas from the Church of Christ tradition, it became clear that the pastoral team had been influenced by three different missional church streams, and none of the church leaders had any knowledge of this fact. Therefore, it is quite difficult to lead a church into a beautiful expression of God's mission if there is no shared imagination about the use of language, or even worse if people are ignorant about the lack of shared imagination, which means that leaders develop a strategy based on different assumptions and therefore different expectations. When this occurs, the results are always tumultuous.

Crabb's comments illustrate a third reason why this question is so important. His opinions reflect the literature on missional church from the perspective that is the simplest and the most accessible. For instance, Van Gelder and Zscheile introduce participating in God's mission as a way "to develop a more integrated understanding of how God continues to work in the world as well as through the church."²⁹ To develop this perspective they enter into dialogue with systematic theologians who espouse a participatory or *perichoretic* understanding of God. Then they offer initial proposals for what this means for the church, leadership, and other practical aspects of the church. However, this perspective of the missional church is quite complex when compared to other missional church proposals. The implications of their proposals have yet to be fleshed out in a way that is widely accessible, thereby limiting diffusion when compared

²⁹ Ibid. 168. See Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*.

with other options. One might argue that, while what they say is both true and even good, it is not true and good in a way that is easily understood at the level of the local church. This directly impacts whether or not local church leaders perceive this as being attractive or inherently beautiful. If a person struggles to understand the meaning of an innovation, its value will not be perceived as attractive. This view of missional church is shaped by very complex theological language, and as a result, the diffusion of this view of the missional church is limited within local congregations.³⁰

Related Questions

The relationship between theological aesthetics and triune participation is not merely a concept that pertains to church and mission. It relates to every aspect of theology and life in God. The issue then is not whether related questions arose through the research. Instead, I have had to draw hard lines to narrow the focus so that the related questions do not become so overwhelming that the research becomes endless.

That being said, there are a few sets of questions that directly pertain to the primary question of this research. They include:

- Questions about relational leadership: How are pastors living in community with their key leaders? For instance, does the imparting of an innovative view of missional church to a core group of leaders create a sense of community between the pastoral

³⁰ In no way am I saying that there is a total absence of resources from the triune participation perspective. I am only saying that when you set the two side-by-side, I estimate that there are twenty times as many resources from a non-triune participation point of view. Most of the resources written from within the view of triune participation are theologically complex, lack practicality, and fall short of being compelling to local leaders within congregations.

leader and those core leaders? How is this sense of community an expression of God's beauty?³¹

- Questions about leadership stress: How does the introduction of an innovation—even if it is beautiful—impact the level of stress that leaders feel to make the church work? In most cases, pastors feel a great deal of pressure to fix the church, often leading people to actions that undermine beauty. Does theological aesthetics reframe how pastors perceive their role and therefore shift the pressure in any way?³²
- Questions about divine mystery: How is God active in unexpected ways in the life of the pastor and in key leaders who are walking with the pastor in understanding the missional church? Where is there mystery? Where are the serendipitous shifts that move the leaders from one place to another? How is spiritual warfare related to the ability of the pastor to communicate this perspective to key leaders? What is the relationship between prayer and communication?³³
- Questions about leadership failure: How are failure, conflict, and pain crucial to a person having the ability to perceive God's beauty? Is this the case as pastors are trying to convey this perspective of God and church? How is this related to the development of a sense of urgency?³⁴

³¹ Andrew Root, *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

³² Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

³³ Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

³⁴ Kotter.

- Questions about practical communication: What forms of communication are needed to diffuse the innovation of missional church as triune participation into church systems? What tools do pastors need to support their work?

A Brief History of Missional Church Language

In order to set the stage for understanding the role that theological aesthetics can play in the missional church conversation, chapter two provides a brief historical survey that demonstrates how the conversation has developed, thereby illustrating the variety of ways that missional church is being expressed as a lived theology. Specifically, it will show how the literature on missional church has been written from within the transcendentals of truth and goodness by introducing five streams according to how they are commonly grouped in the marketplace.³⁵

Theoretical Lenses

The theoretical lenses adopted for this project are surveyed in chapter three. These include an introduction to the discipline of aesthetics, an examination of the expression of beauty, and an overview of how innovation diffusion is related to the way that a person perceives beauty.

Transcendentals and Aesthetics

This section provides a basic introduction to the philosophical categories of the transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. This is followed by a section that defines the nature of the study of aesthetics in general, thereby setting the stage for the chapter on

³⁵ This grouping is derived from my experience as an editor and writer whose work has primarily focused on church leadership resources. In fact, I have written or ghost-written books for all five of the streams introduced in this brief history.

theological aesthetics. The philosophical work of John Milbank is employed to highlight how beauty involves seeing the “invisible in the visible” in order to provide a frame of reference for perceiving the beauty that lies beneath the surface of that which is true and good.

Expressing Beauty

Craig Van Gelder’s work explores what it means to be a missional community that is led by the Spirit. He does this by asking two primary exegetical questions. The first is “What is God doing?” The second question is “What does God want to do?”³⁶ The first question is a matter of discernment whereby a church explores ways of participating in what God is already doing. The second question focuses on what it might mean to intentionally enter into and grow in the mission of God. These two questions point to how the Spirit leads a church to enter into a local context and develop aptitudes for participating in what the Spirit is doing and how the Spirit wants to create communication and engagement between the church and the local context.

The questions raised by Van Gelder are questions that relate to aesthetics. That which the Spirit is already doing and that which the Spirit wants to do is true, good, and beautiful. A philosophical understanding of beauty is explored to assess how missional church is beautiful. The work of the British philosopher Roger Scruton provides a basic introduction to the beautiful, how it is understood, and how it is conveyed.³⁷ In addition, John de Gruchy, a theologian from South Africa, has done extensive work on the

³⁶ Van Gelder, 59-61.

³⁷ Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

relationship between the gospel and social transformation as it relates to beauty and the church.³⁸ His survey of philosophical views of aesthetics explains how truth, goodness, and beauty work with regard to social transformation.

Perceiving the Beauty of an Innovation

The vision for missional church as triune participation is an innovation or new paradigm. As argued by Thomas Kuhn in his work on the way paradigms have influence the field of science,³⁹ the paradigm that a person has influences how one perceives a new idea like missional church. The theory of innovation diffusion has been primarily shaped by the book *Diffusion of Innovations* by Everett Rogers.⁴⁰ The research done in this field shows that a new product or idea will not be adopted uniformly by a large populace. Instead very few innovators will adopt a new idea, and then those people will convey the idea to the next, slightly larger group called early adopters. The innovators and early adopters make up about seventeen percent of the population. Then the early adopters can communicate to the group called the early majority.

Hindrances to Perception

Robert Jenson argues that “politics [is] the joint moral deliberation of a community, the process of its consenting in justice or at second best to form a

³⁸ John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Joel Arthur Barker, *Future Edge: Discovering the New Paradigms of Success*, 1st ed. (New York: W. Morrow, 1992).

⁴⁰ Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2003).

simulacrum of justice.”⁴¹ As such, every organization has a politic, a way of operating that shapes how life within the community that comprises that organization works. Therefore, there is no politic-free organization or church. The problem though is that in many—if not most cases—churches have been formed according to political practices that are inherently repulsive. In order to see the beauty of God’s mission in the world, we must develop skills for understanding that which is inherently anti-beauty. Paradoxically, as will be demonstrated in the theological lenses, these repulsive places are where God’s beauty is at work. In order to move a church into God’s beautiful mission, we cannot merely place the new on top of the old. That which is ugly must be understood and addressed. For help along these lines, I interact with the proposals of the social critic Slavoj Žižek.⁴²

Theological Lenses

The theological lenses that guided this research challenge some traditional assumptions about the theology of *missio Dei*. This doctrine, which has been helpful and influential, was developed in the Western church and was applied in a way that promoted the “church as culture” in diverse contexts. This chapter opens with a brief critique of *missio Dei* in order to set the stage for how theological aesthetics can help us reimagine it. I draw from the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar to establish the validity of this lens, as he is the primary modern theologian who has shaped the conversation of theological

⁴¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2:78.

⁴² Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Phronesis (New York: Verso, 1989); *The Plague of Fantasies*, Wo Es War (New York: Verso, 1997).

aesthetics.⁴³ In addition, the writings of Greg Boyd,⁴⁴ David Bentley Hart, and Jonathan Edwards have served as the primary influences upon my thinking. This chapter explores three specific aspects of beauty, which are introduced below.

The Poetics of *Missio Dei*

The first lens explored through the framework of theological aesthetics is the beauty of God as the poetics of mission. The mission of God is based in the being of God. God's life *ad intra* emanates in God's life *ad extra*.⁴⁵

The beauty of God's being aids in the development of an imagination of missional church as triune participation. This relates to the common way of viewing the *missio Dei* perspective as the God who sends, as illustrated by the account of David Bosch⁴⁶ and Lesslie Newbigin.⁴⁷ The theology of *missio Dei*, as argued by John Flett,⁴⁸ demonstrates that mission is not an act that is secondary to God's being and therefore not secondary to the being of the church, but instead the act of mission is intrinsic to the being of God and

⁴³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

⁴⁴ Gregory A. Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: P. Lang, 1992).

⁴⁵ This is merely a different way of articulating Rahner's Trinitarian axiom: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity." The revelation of God in Christ by the Spirit unveils the immanent or eternal being of God, Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1997), 22. As LaCugna writes, "God's saving activity through Jesus Christ and the Spirit fully expresses what God is already 'in Godself.' More accurately, God's actions reveal who and what God is," Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 211.

⁴⁶ Bosch.

⁴⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978). *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, American ed., World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism Study Pamphlets, (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964).

⁴⁸ Flett.

derivatively the being of the church. God is a sending God and therefore the church is a sent church. However, left to itself, this point of view tends to make the sending of the church the primary reason for the church's existence. As a result, the language of participation is aligned with the act of being sent by God and therefore the being of God and the church is left undefined and disconnected from the act.

We need to understand the missional church in the light of the being of God, as triune communion who is overflowing love. In agreement with *missio Dei* theology, this view of God understands mission as intrinsic to both God's act and to God's being, thereby clarifying the nature of the *missio Dei*. It is not just that God is an act of mission. It is that the triune way of being defines the way that God acts.⁴⁹

The Performance of *Missio Dei*

To understand what it means for the beauty of the triune God to shape ecclesial practice, I explore the implications of the cross as it relates to the missional church. In his innovative tome *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, Greg Boyd has developed what he calls the cruciform hermeneutic, based on the work of Jürgen Moltmann,⁵⁰ which views the cross as the climax of the narrative revelation of God and therefore the climax of the revelation of God's triune being.⁵¹ This cruciform hermeneutic is explored as a way to

⁴⁹ A few of the voices which offer constructive developments regarding a participatory view of the Trinity include: Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); LaCugna.

⁵⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁵¹ Gregory A. Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

advance the missional conversation so as to increase the understanding, performance, and practice of the missional church as triune participation.

The cross is the ultimate revelation of God's beauty because it is the ultimate expression of God's love (1 John 3:16). In order to understand the beauty that God is and therefore to understand the beauty of God's mission, the cross must serve as the interpretive portal. The cross demonstrates the distance that God is willing to go in order to reach the other, as God became what God is not in order to reach the other who stands in rebellion to God's beauty. As a result, God became ultimately repulsive—a condemned criminal—to include others in his ultimate beauty. This lens explores how the cross puts on display God's paradoxical beauty and therefore redefines beauty from a triune perspective.

The Practices of *Missio Dei*

This lens employs Jonathan Edwards' *A Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World*⁵² where he looks at God's ultimate aims for creation as they are connected to our participation in God's beauty. The question of the ultimate *telos* of God as it relates to God's being triune has a direct implication on the ultimate aim of the church and the mission of God. God's end for God's creation is to be included in the life of beauty experienced in the being of God, as Father-Son-Spirit. And therefore, it has direct implications on how we talk about this innovation.

The aesthetic question is related to how God's people participate in God's beauty. In contrast to a "try harder" strategy, this lens introduces what it means to participate in

⁵² Jonathan Edwards and Paul Ramsey, *Ethical Writings*, Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

what Jonathan Edwards calls “remanation.” Not only does God emanate his love in mission, but also we are drawn up into God’s life through the work of Christ who stands in the place of rebellious humans. Jesus is the faithful covenant keeper who remanates in our stead.

Methodology

Exploratory Case Study Research

This project is based on exploratory case study research. This method is appropriate to my topic for a variety of reasons. First, it is exploratory because the topic of theological aesthetics as it relates to missional church has not been addressed from a theoretical view, much less from a practical perspective. Therefore, the practical research only offers an initial foray of asking questions about what theological aesthetics might mean for pastoral leadership within a missional church framework. Secondly, it employs case studies through an analysis of four specific local church settings where creative pastoral leaders have communicated the missional church as trinitarian participation.

Summary of Research Design

The research was broken into three phases. The first phase was to identify specific pastoral leaders to study. These pastors were selected because they had been part of the Congregational Mission and Leadership Ph.D. or D.Min. programs at Luther Seminary and because they have a propensity toward creative leadership. I then performed introductory background research on their churches and reviewed their dissertations. I chose four which appeared to meet the criteria above, which I outline in the methodology chapter, and I set times for either a phone interview or an on-site meeting.

The second phase involved the preparation for the interviews. I read the dissertations written by the pastoral leaders, studied the church's websites, and analyzed contextual data of the neighborhoods in which the churches are set.

The next phase entailed the one-hour interview with each pastor. My interview protocol, found in appendix A, focused on three specific things. First, I sought to understand the view of the missional church that they embraced through their studies in the CML program at Luther Seminary. The aim is to ascertain the language they use to talk about what it means to be missional, to identify leadership patterns that are rooted in their theology of the triune God, and to discover ways they have creatively helped people enter into the truth and practices of missional church life. Secondly, based on the theses that they wrote, I asked questions about how what they learned through the program has been translated in their work at the local level. Third, I sought to understand how beauty has influenced the way that they lead people into mission, whether or not they had any knowledge of theological aesthetics. After these interviews, I wrote extensive notes in a journal about my initial impressions and interpretations of what was shared.

Interpretation of Data

I analyzed the data by identifying broad-based themes from the transcribed interviews and the journal notes that were written. These themes were sorted, summarized, and compared according to the process of interpreting qualitative data proposed in *Qualitative Interviewing* by Herbert and Irene Rubin.⁵³

⁵³ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, Second ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 224ff.

Conclusions

The argument of this thesis is that the reframing of *missio Dei* through the lens of theological aesthetics informs the way that missional church is perceived and expressed and therefore requires distinct roles of the missional leaders who are working toward a *telos* of missional church shaped by theological aesthetics. Therefore, following the chapter that reports on the interviews are two chapters that address conclusions. The first works out the implications for the *telos* of missional church in the light of theological aesthetics. The second proposes a language for missional leadership that aligns with this *telos*.

Other Matters

Definition of Key Terms

Missional Church—The view of the church that defines the people of God as sent as a sign, witness, and foretaste of God’s dream for the world.⁵⁴

Theological Aesthetics—The study that is “concerned with questions about God and issues in theology in light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination), through beauty, and the arts.”⁵⁵ It pertains to a study of divine

⁵⁴ As will be made clear, there are a variety of ways to define the missional church, however, this broad-based definition developed by Lesslie Newbigin serves as an umbrella definition under which most, if not all, definitions fall, Lesslie Newbigin, "The Nature and Calling of the Church," in *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, ed. Paul Weston (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 138.

⁵⁵ Gesa Elsabeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 1.

beauty as the source of beauty along with the capacity of humans to perceive and embrace this divine beauty.⁵⁶

Missio Dei—The Latin phrase for “sending of God.” This theological perspective focuses on the Father who sends the Son and the sending of the church by the Spirit for the sake of redeeming all things.

Triune Participation—The view of theology proper whereby God is inviting others into relational communion with the Son, before the Father, by the power of the Spirit.

Perichoresis—The Greek word which means rotation, which speaks to the how the Father, Son, and Spirit abide in and share life with one another in “reciprocal interiority” while at the same time remaining distinct persons.⁵⁷

Telos—Greek word used to name what is imagined as the ultimate end toward which one is moving.

Diffusion of Innovations—The study of the process by which an innovation is communicated and received (or rejected) by individuals and groups within a social system.⁵⁸

Innovators—The group identified by diffusion of innovations theory that is most open to new ideas, even to the point of pursuing them. Only 2.5% of the population comprises this segment.

⁵⁶ Alex García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 11.

⁵⁷ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, *Sacra Doctrina* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 208-09.

⁵⁸ Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 35.

Early Adopters—This group includes 13.5% of the population. Next to the innovators, these people embrace new ideas the quickest. They are the most crucial to the adoption of an innovation.

Cruciform Hermeneutic—A theological perspective which places the cross at the center of the interpretation of all theological themes.⁵⁹

Spiritual Practices—Actions taken by individuals and groups that are initiated and empowered by the Spirit to make space within the church for increased capacity for the Spirit so that the people of God might more fully experience the reality of participation in the Triune God and produce the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit.

Ethical Concerns

The research for this thesis project was conducted in a manner compliant with the ethical standards of Luther Seminary and the guidelines offered by the Institutional Review Board. All participants in this project were treated with respect, including every effort to maintain their anonymity. Participants were not paid or otherwise rewarded for participation in the project, and participation was completely voluntary.

Participants in the interviews received an informed consent letter at the beginning of each interview (See appendix B). The letters assured participants that their participation is not required, that they can cease participation at any time, and that their relationship with the congregation, with Luther Seminary, and with me will not be negatively impacted should they opt out of the project. In the interviews, I used language

⁵⁹ Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*.

that is sensitive to issues of social justice and sought to diminish the role of power-dynamics that are present between those I am interviewing and me.

Throughout the process I recorded the interviews. The recordings and the transcriptions are kept in a password-protected file on my personal computer. I and my thesis advisors are the only persons to have access to the recordings. I also provided pseudonyms for the organizations and individuals who participated in this project. I will destroy all of the data gathered for this project after three years.

Conclusion

The diffusion of the innovation of missional church is at a crucial point in its development. Whether it advances further or it only exits as another passing idea in the cycle of church programs will not depend on missional leaders who can make things happen or create new resources. The missional church will advance to the degree that the beauty of God informs the *telos* of missional church, which in turn will shape the beauty of missional leaders. Only that which is perceived as beautiful will instill desire for participation, and only as we participate freely, and therefore sacrificially, will the church live into the beauty of the divine life.

CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MISSIONAL CHURCH IMAGINATIONS

Beginning in the 1960s,¹ the voices of a few innovators served as precursors to the missional church conversation. These include Elton Trueblood, John Howard Yoder, Howard Snyder, Donald McGavran, Lesslie Newbigin, J. C Hoekendijk, and Elizabeth O'Connor.² They perceived how the context of Western Christendom was coming to an end and questioned the assumed *telos* of the established ways of doing church. They were naming the fact that the realities of church in Western culture were shifting and that if churches continue as is they will not be faithful to the gospel.³

One significant turning point in the conversation occurred in 1998 with the publication of the book *Missional Church*, co-authored by a group from the Gospel in Our Culture Network.⁴ It launched a movement of church practice innovation as its

¹ While there were some who raised questions before this time, this decade seems to mark a common place of burgeoning unrest with the status quo.

² Some of the resources developed at this point in the history include: Elton Trueblood, *The Incendiary Fellowship*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper, 1967); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972); Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wine Skins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975); Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, The Kerr Lectures, (New York: Friendship Pr., 1954); Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, *The Church inside Out*, Adventures in Faith (Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1966); Elizabeth O'Connor, *The New Community*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

³ For example, Alan Roxburgh identifies eight cultural shifts: globalization, pluralism, rapid technological change, postmodernism, staggering global need, loss of confidence in primary structures, and the democratization of knowledge. See Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition*, 1st ed., Leadership Network (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 90-110.

⁴ Guder et al.

language and proposals have influenced a generation of church thought leaders, both professional theologians and church practitioners alike. Since its release there have been over 200 books published with “missional church” either in the title or the subtitle.⁵

However, even more extensive are the resources—which would be impossible to count—that have been influenced by the missional church proposal.⁶

This team of writers observed that a “radical shift is taking place in the way our society sees the church’s presence and the way that society assigns its place in the scheme of things. Deep crisis points are now visible in the social order itself, and old rules are up for grabs.” Where in previous generations lone prophets may have announced that there was something wrong with the internal working of the church, this book announces that the context is going through a radical shift and that the way church has operated as a lived theology no longer connects with that culture. Even more, the authors were describing the need for the church to ask “the question of its own identity and mission in this place and time,” and proposed a new framework that would equip the church to be “clear about the nature of the cultural context that it shares and by which it is shaped.”⁷ As a result, it calls into question the identity the church where mission is merely an ancillary program alongside many others.

⁵ Some of the most notable will be introduced below.

⁶ A few examples include: Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez, *Churches, Cultures & Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011); C. Christopher Smith, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014); Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014); Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

⁷ Guder et al., 15.

The publication of *Mission Church* did not prescribe a uniform *telos* for all churches to embrace; instead it raised questions about what the church has been and what the church can be, and the answers proposed by these questions have varied widely depending on the specific *telos* that a particular thought leader has brought with them to the conversation. While almost all the authors who write on this topic claim that their perspective aligns with the general proposals of those found in *Missional Church*, each brings an unexamined *telos* to the conversation about the kind of the church they intend to see produced as a result of their perspective. What follows are five groups of literature that have developed around five *teloi* that have been imagined for the missional church.⁸

They are:

- Missional Church as Evangelistic Growth: Ed Stetzer⁹
- Missional Church as Community Impact: Reggie McNeal¹⁰
- Missional Church as Restructuring for Movement: Alan Hirsch¹¹

⁸ The number of authors that could be explored to demonstrate the different perspectives of missional church is vast. The authors highlighted here are all white men from North America, which excludes important voices that offer diversity, as illustrated by the international research of Graham Hill reported in *Globalchurch: Reshaping Our Conversations, Renewing Our Mission, Revitalizing Our Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016). However, the primary voices that I encounter in my interaction with church leaders are best illustrated by these voices because of their broad influence. The choice of these thought leaders is not based on their theological veracity or practical effectiveness regarding missional church, but on the impact they have had on the diffusion of the innovation of missional church at the popular level.

In addition, I recognize that there are streams of missional church that are not represented by the perspectives chronicled. For instance, the emergent church movement and the contributions of a leader like Doug Padgett and the Neo-Reformed proposals of Tim Keller and the Gospel Coalition are excluded from this history. While these voices have much to offer, I did not include them because these streams of thought have not to this point had a direct impact upon the churches with whom I work.

⁹ Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006). Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub., 2010).

¹⁰ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003). *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

¹¹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006). Alan Hirsch, Tim Catchim, and Mike Breen, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic*

- Missional Church as Theopolitics: David Fitch¹²
- Missional Church as Contextual Engagement: Alan Roxburgh¹³

Missional Church as Evangelistic Growth

Ed Stetzer is the most prolific author who represents this perspective. To flesh out what this means in his various writings, Stetzer contrasts his view with the church growth movement by challenging the “methodological mania” that promises growth when a church follows the prescribed formula.¹⁴ At the same time, the research methodology that lies behind his writings is derived from and builds on that which was established by church growth theorists, specifically Donald McGavran. The basic theories of church growth have served as an interpretive grid through which missional church is understood; the difference of the new view in contrast to the old is a recognition of the need for a “missionary mentality” where the people in the church have a “mindset to be a missionary in their community and ultimately to the entire world.” The imagination of what this means is fleshed out in terms of the Great Commission, as traditionally

Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church, 1st ed., Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

¹² David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016). David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity: Ten Signposts into the Missional Frontier*, 1st ed., The Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013). David E. Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism?: Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission: Towards an Evangelical Political Theology*, Theopolitical Visions (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

¹³ Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time. Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015). *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition*.

¹⁴ Stetzer and Putman, 46.

interpreted by Evangelical leaders and scholars. “[T]he Great Commission provides the what of mission while the Great Commandment provides the how.”¹⁵

The title *Transformational Church* speaks to the imagined *telos* that drives the research and the factors the book’s authors identify, i.e., transformed churches leads to transformed lives, which comes through evangelism and church participation. The connection of evangelism to mission is a, if not the, primary emphasis of those who operate within this stream of thought. We might image the *telos* as shifting from the current state to one where the doors are opened in such a way that new believers are added to the church.

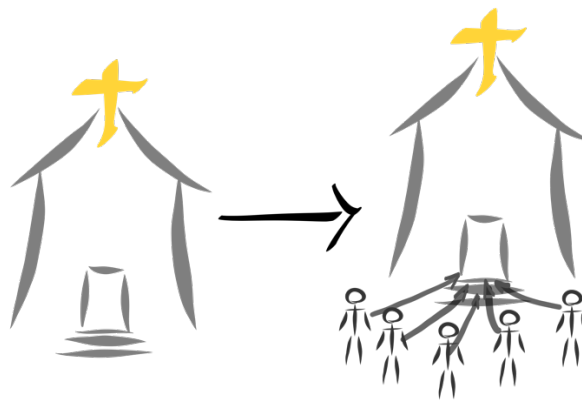


Figure 4: The Telos of Evangelistic Growth

Stetzer uses words like “ultimacy,” “priority,” and “centrality” in reference to the importance of evangelism within the overall mission of the church, and states that “we need to address the theological and historical reality that gospel proclamation *needs elevation*, even within the consensus that mission is holistic.”¹⁶ Stetzer’s research and

¹⁵ Stetzer and Rainer, 70.

¹⁶ Ed Stetzer, "Response by Ed Stetzer," in *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation*, ed. Craig Ott (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 168.

theories, along with others influenced by church growth theory, have had a significant impact upon established churches who are trying to increase their evangelistic impact.

Missional Church as Community Impact

Those who promote the Community Impact view espouse a shift from the *telos* of internal development of the church to the *telos* of the external impact a church can have upon its context. This perspective is illustrated by the internal vs. external shift that some argue as central to the mission of the church. For instance, in *The Externally-Focused Quest: Becoming the Best Church FOR the Community* by Eric Swanson and Rick Rusau, the authors propose a “go to” alternative to the attractional way of doing church. They write, “The attractional church is a ‘come to’ church. Externally focused churches can best be described as ‘go to’ churches or sometimes as ‘missional’ churches.”¹⁷ In his highly influential title *Missional Renaissance*, Reggie McNeal offers a basic definition of a missional church, stating that it is “the people of God partnering with God in his redemptive mission of the world,”¹⁸ which is fleshed out with three shifts which he has determined as crucial for a church to move into mission; these include:

- From an Internal to an External Focus
- From Program Development to People Development
- From Church-Based to Kingdom-Based Leadership

Throughout the book, McNeal offers dialectical shifts in the “from ... to ...” form that sets the old internally-focused patterns of doing church against a new “missional” way that seeks to have an impact upon the local context.

¹⁷ Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest: Becoming the Best Church for the Community*, 1st ed., Leadership Network Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 29.

¹⁸ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 25.

Ronald Sider's book *Churches that Make a Difference* offers a clear view of the practices of churches that adopt this approach, as it promotes the *telos* of offering a holistic gospel by reaching the community with both good news and good works through six foci:¹⁹

- Focus on ministries of personal spiritual transformation as a path to social change.
- Focus on social services as a door to evangelism.
- Focus on ministries of reconciliation that witness to unity in Christ.
- Focus on community development to express God's love for whole persons and communities.
- Focus on justice ministries that embody the empowering message of the gospel.
- Focus on reaching skeptics by demonstrating that the church makes a difference.

The imagination of making a difference in the world provides a word picture for the ends of this perspective. The Gospel is to make a difference in the context, not just the church, and Christians—both as individuals and as communities—have a choice as to whether or not they will do so. They can move from current reality toward this *telos*.

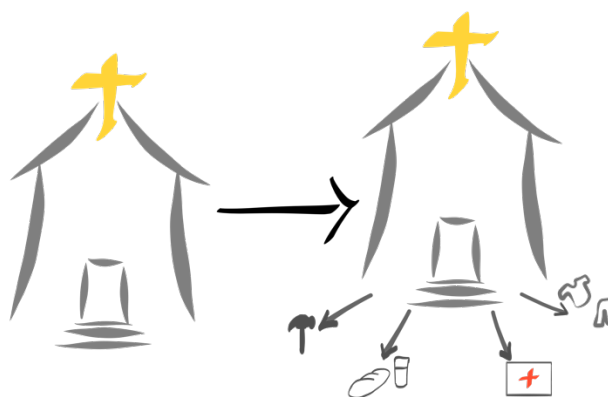


Figure 5: The Telos of Community Impact

¹⁹ Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 36-44.

Often this gets applied through an activist imagination, as illustrated by this statement made to pastors by Reggie McNeal, “Every obstacle to your going missional is sitting right here in this room. No one can keep you from going missional. Only you can.”²⁰ This focus on action in the community and making choices to think and act differently stirs up the imagination to get out of the traditional church organization and make something happen.

Missional Church as Restructuring for Movement

Those within the movement view of the missional church tend to work from a critique of Constantinian structures which have shaped the lived theology of the attractional church and the leadership patterns required to run such structures, where a few appointed leaders perform the ministry while the masses are passive observers of the ministry.²¹ The challenge for this view is not that of a shifting context but that the church has operated according to a misguided structure since the fourth century. Subsequently, they identify alternative structures that will release movement growth. Such structures define patterns of how church life is shaped, how leadership is organized, and the mental models for how the church operates.²²

Alan Hirsch has offered the most extensive proposals on the movement view of missional church for the Western church. His influence has been far-reaching and the

²⁰ Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give up Our Obsession with Fixing the Church—and What We Should Do Instead* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2015), 133.

²¹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*, Second Edition. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 35-36.

²² The roots of this view extend back to the work of Roland Allen who served as a missionary to China and challenged established forms of the church in the early twentieth century. See Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); *St. Paul's Missionary Methods: A Study of the Church in Four Provinces* (New York: S. R. Leland, 1930).

publications that derive from his work are extensive. His *telos* of missional church is illustrated by the subtitle of the revision of his best-selling volume, *The Forgotten Ways*. While the subtitle of the first edition read *Reactivating the Missional Church*, the second edition reads *Reactivating Apostolic Movements*. We might imagine the *telos* of the church in this way:

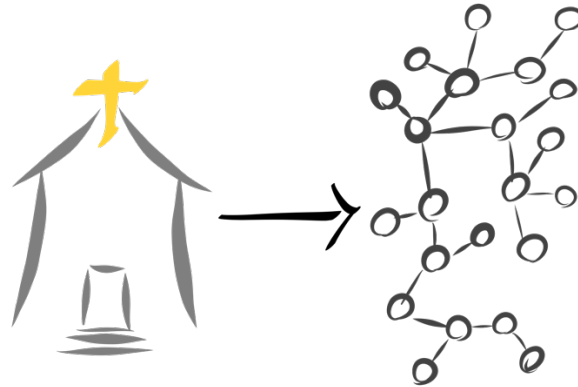


Figure 6: The Telos of Restructuring for Movement

For Hirsch, the missional church is one that has been activated for movement growth, which is embedded in a theology that roots the church in mission. The church is a product of the apostolic sending of God. As he has been quoted often: “[W]e work hard to embed the following ‘formula’ for engaging in mission in a post-Christian culture: Christology determines missiology, and missiology determines ecclesiology.”²³

As with other promoters of a movement view of church, he identifies core movement characteristics, which he calls mDNA or movement DNA. His list includes six:²⁴

- Jesus is Lord
- Disciple Making

²³ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*, 154.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

- Missional-Incarnational Impulse
- Liminality and Communitas
- APEST Culture
- Organic Systems

The *telos* is to facilitate this mDNA through the development of a network of organic churches—which may come in the form of small groups, house churches, or mid-sized groups—through intentional discipleship, and through team-based leadership that is shaped by APEST (Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds, and Teachers).²⁵ This is accomplished as God’s people discover what has been forgotten but lies dormant within the church and within Christians. Hirsch writes:

[W]e can conclude that the seed of the future does indeed lie in the womb of the present, that every church claiming the name of Jesus has all of the selfsame dormant potentials so evident in the New Testament ecclesia, the early church, the Chinese movement, and every other movement in between. All we need to do is to retrieve that seed, nurture the conditions for its healthy growth, very deliberately remove whatever hinders it, and let the Holy Spirit yet again connect us with our Messiah Jesus and empower us in his redemptive cause.²⁶

Missional church as movement requires that the church remove all that hinders this movement growth—which usually means getting back to some kind of church form that was practiced during the first century. The secret lies within this ideal form of church which can be multiplied in any context.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 187ff.

²⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁷ This view proposes a strategy that supposedly will launch a church to shift from addition growth to exponential multiplication growth. See Neil Cole, *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church*, Leadership Network (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Steve Addison, *Pioneering Movements: Leadership That Multiplies Disciples and Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015). In many cases, the argument for this strategy is supported by the Church Planting Movements in China, India, and Southeast Asia. On this phenomenon, see *Movements That Change the World: Five Keys to Spreading the Gospel*, Rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011); V. David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004).

Missional Church as Theopolitics

One of the voices who indirectly influenced the writing of *Missional Church* was Stanley Hauerwas, as he was one of three theologians invited to consult with the team of writers as they researched and drafted the chapters of the book.²⁸ In 1989, Hauerwas, along with William Willimon, wrote *Resident Aliens*, a book that was having a wide-spread influence upon the church conversation. In that book, which has the subtitle *Life in the Christian Colony*, the authors proposed that the church is a *polis*, a city that offers a contrasting way of life to that practiced by the majority culture. They write, “What we call ‘church’ is too often a gathering of strangers who see the church as yet another ‘helping institution’ to gratify further their individual desires.”²⁹ Their focus lies upon the *telos* of the formation of a people whose “political task” is to “be the church rather than to transform the world.”³⁰ The *telos* of the church is not to fix the world or to make it Christian, but to be the people of God. Christians do this by responding to Christ who calls the “Christian colony” to himself³¹ as opposed to developing a strategy to make the world more Christian. Therefore, they write, “The church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy.”³² It has the *telos* in mind of living into its political

²⁸ Guder et al., 8.

²⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 138.

³⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹ Ibid., 78.

³² Ibid., 43.

character that is shaped by its theological reality, hence the theopolitical view of the missional church.³³

The work of David Fitch has served as an interpreter of Hauerwas' point of view. In *Faithful Presence*, he explicates seven disciplines (The Lord's Table, Reconciliation, Proclaiming the Gospel, Being with the "Least of These," Being with the Children, Fivefold Gifting, and Kingdom Prayer) related to how the presence of Christ is real in the church and in the world. He specifically identifies three domains where the presence of Christ is moving and therefore carrying out the mission of God. The first he calls the "close circle," which is comprised of those fully committed to following Christ. The second is the "dotted circle," the space in our neighborhoods where Christians gather as hosts to both the committed and the uncommitted alike. The third is called the "half-circle," which includes the place in our world where Christians go as guests. The seven disciplines shape the church to recognize and to participate in the presence of Christ in all three of these circles. The *telos* within this imagination is to move the church into these three circles by adopting practices that promotes this kind of life together.

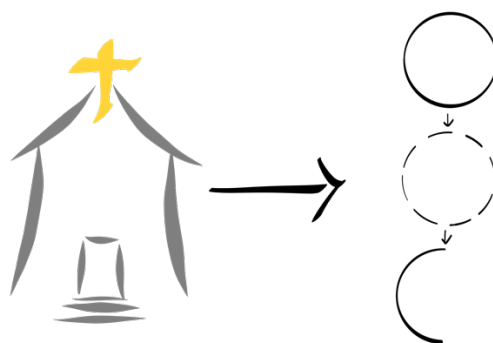


Figure 7: The Telos of Theopolitics

³³ A significant British voice who has sought to work out what Hauerwas' theology means for the local church and mission is Samuel Wells. See Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2017); *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

The emphasis here lies on the presence of Christ through the church as it goes “confident that God in Christ is at work in the whole world. . . . What God is working for in the world takes on flesh in the midst of these disciplines. This is witness. This is church.” Fitch’s emphasis advocates that the mission of God “is made visible by Christ’s presence via the church.”³⁴ Thus the church offers an alternative politic that engages the world out of fullness, as opposed to one of emptiness which is based on ideological claims that have no meaning for real life. The fullness formed through the disciplines confronts disciplines that have shaped the politic of the church we have inherited.

Missional Church as Contextual Engagement

Directly behind the proposals of *Missional Church* lies the work of Lesslie Newbigin, a British missionary to India. In 1974, he returned to his home country after thirty years of service, which gave him a quite different perspective to interpret the reality of Western Christianity. He was an outsider with insider eyes who could see that the supposed Christian England that he had left as a young missionary was no longer Christian. It, in fact, had become a mission field. He wrote in 1963, “The Western world has had to be recognized once again as a mission field, and the churches have been compelled in a new way to define their nature and mission as parts of a divine society distinct from the wider society of nations in which they live, and all these factors have contributed to the developments in the field of theology in the direction of a missionary understanding of the nature of the Church itself.”³⁵

³⁴ Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission*, 201.

³⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (London: Paternoster House Press, 1963, 1998), 12.

His writings raised huge questions about the nature of the church, the meaning of the gospel and how the two relate to this fluctuating context. In other words, the church that had been shaped by a Constantinian imagination was no longer a viable option. Rather than criticizing the historical choices made by church leaders who agreed to the Constantinian option, he focused on the reality of the new context in which the church finds itself. He wrote in his book *The Other Side of 1984*, “We are now faced with a new task which may be defined as follows: how to embody in the life and teaching of the Church the claim that Christ is Lord over all life, without falling into the Constantinian impasse?”³⁶ Then he challenged the privatization of religion which common expressions of the church were offering, patterns that had been given to the church by the larger culture. Instead of the gospel being a truth that pertains to “all life,” it had become a private set of beliefs for church members “with a view to their ultimate blessedness in another world.”³⁷

Extending this line of thought is the work of Alan Roxburgh. Of the six-member team who coauthored *Missional Church*, Roxburgh was the only one who was a local pastor of a congregation at the time of its writing. Soon after its publication, he resigned from his role as a pastor and became a consultant and now leads The Missional Network. His work has sought to work out the implications explored in *Missional Church* into church organization and leadership.

³⁶ *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*, The Risk Book Series (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

His little-known title, *Crossing the Bridge: Church Leadership in a Time of Change*,³⁸ was one of the first books written after the release of *Missional Church* that deals with the implications of the Newbigin agenda. The structure of this book illustrates his contextual-engagement perspective. He is not proposing a theoretical framework for leadership success based on abstract principles. Instead, he identifies the nature of the time of transition in which we live and then invites leaders into a process so that they can engage this reality and discover new ways of leading that will arise out of this transition. This is not about going from one point to another, or from a traditional view of leadership to a missional view of leadership. It is a way of changing as a leader so that one can discover who to be as a leader in a new era.

The point of Roxburgh's emphasis is that the reality of our new context requires leaders and churches as a whole to enter into a process of learning what it means to be God's people in this new context. Therefore, the *telos* of the missional church is not about envisioning a predetermined model of what the church will look like or a list of principles that will describe the church. Instead, it is about participating in the reality that God is at work in the context of the world, which is part of the meaning of missional church as triune participation. This could be imagined as moving toward a three-way conversation between the gospel, culture and the church, which exist at the three corners of a triangle.

³⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Crossing the Bridge: Church Leadership in a Time of Change* (Costa Mesa, CA: Percept Group, 2000).

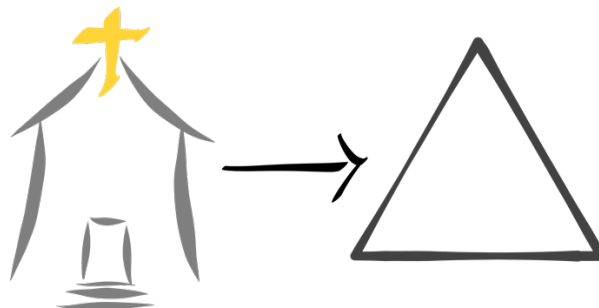


Figure 8: The Telos of Contextual Engagement

In this view, God is both “sending” the church into the world while at the same time God is “participating” in the world. This means that the church “is not the primary actor, but God is, then we have to assume that God is already ahead of us.”³⁹

This calls for a set of practices that shape the church to discern how God is already ahead of us: Listening, Discerning, Testing, Reflecting, and Deciding.⁴⁰ These five are a simplification of the Missional Change Model which is laid out in more detail in *The Missional Leader*⁴¹ and in *Introducing the Missional Church*. Distinct from the practices (disciplines) proposed by Fitch which pertain to the entire life of the church, Roxburgh’s five practices specifically pertain to discovering the ways that the presence of God is at work in the local context where a church is set. These practices, rooted in the imagination of the process of the Missional Change Model, result in experiments and innovations, ways of being the church in the local context that fit that context. In other words, the *telos* is to discover the future of the church arising through the process.

³⁹ *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*, 43.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴¹ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

Truth and Goodness

These five leading streams of missional church lived theology have been expressed within the framework of truth and goodness without directly promoting its beauty. This will become clear as the meaning of beauty is delineated in the following chapter. As an introductory claim, the argument that beauty has been left out of the conversation—for the most part—is based on the fact that the missioal church has been articulated in terms of surface-level descriptions. Much ink has been spilled to argue for the veracity of the need for the church to be missional—expressed in a variety of ways—and it is clear that this missional view is useful because the church as we know it will not thrive in this changing context. However, very little work has been done on the inherent beauty of the missional church that speaks to what the following chapter names as the “invisible in the visible” or the life of mission that lies beneath the surface. This is not surprising because “beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach,”⁴² argues Balthasar in his opening words of his seven volumes on theological aesthetics. We might end the conversation with a claim that some point of view is inherently beautiful—after all the arguments of its truth and goodness have been exhausted—but we dare not begin with it. This, I would argue, is where we stand in the missional church conversation. We have an extensive encyclopedia of its truth and goodness, but there is a vast field of opportunity to explore what God’s mission might mean from the perspective of beauty.

To understand what truth, goodness, and beauty are, why they are important, and how they work, a basic understanding of the transcendentals is helpful, which serves as

⁴² Balthasar, 18.

the starting point of the next chapter. This then will set the stage for re-imagining the *telos* of the missional church (chapter seven) and the leadership roles that promote that *telos* (chapter eight).

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL LENSES: EXPRESSING AND PERCEIVING BEAUTY

Introduction

The previous chapter provided a survey of five popular ways that missional church has developed as lived theologies. These are offered to illustrate how truth and goodness have shaped the *telos* of the church which defines how missional church has been expressed, performed, and practiced. From this we can claim beauty as it relates to the missional church has been the Cinderella of the transcendentals. Truth and goodness have attended the missional church ball with great fanfare,¹ while beauty has remained hidden away at home.² This is not surprising as this has been the case for both philosophy and theology in general since the dawn of the Enlightenment.

This chapter establishes a framework for catching a vision for the *telos* of the missional church as the beauty of God. Using a painting by Daniel Bonnell,³ we might imagine that the *telos* of the mission of God is the ultimate expression of God's being on

¹ While it is beyond the limits of this thesis, one could perform a detailed examination of the five perspectives of the missional church surveyed in the previous chapter and assess the degree to which each emphasizes either truth and/or goodness. For instance, it could be argued that the view shaped by Lesslie Newbigin is primarily developed from the transcendental of truth and works toward goodness, and that the one shaped by Stanley Hauerwas from the transcendental of goodness and works toward truth.

² This is a modification of Alister McGrath's observation about the Holy Spirit where he writes, "The Holy Spirit has long been the Cinderella of the Trinity. The other two sisters may have gone to the theological ball; the Holy Spirit got left behind every time," Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 240. The relationship between beauty and the third article is a topic worthy of exploration in and of itself, but it is beyond what can be addressed in this project.

³ Daniel Bonnell, *Beautiful Mess*, 2008, oil on canvas, 72 x 58", <http://www.bonnellart.com>. Daniel Bonnell, *Beautiful Mess*, 2008.

the cross. Therefore, the *telos* of the missional church is to move toward the beauty of the cross, a point that will be argued theologically in the following chapter.

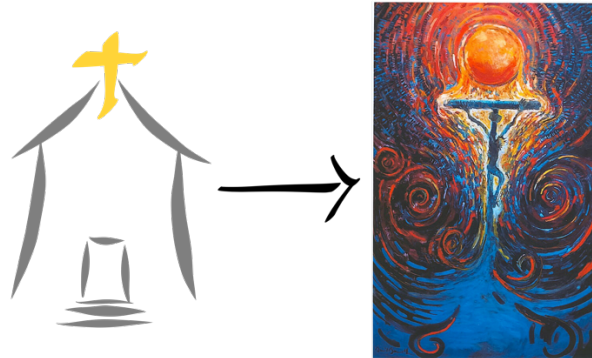


Figure 9: The Telos of Beauty

The groundwork for the theological aesthetics developed in the next chapter is set up in this chapter first by exploring the philosophical topic of transcendentals. This is followed by the nature of philosophical aesthetics as the expression and perception of beauty as “the invisible in the visible” or that which lies beneath the veneer of principles (truth) and practices (goodness).

Transcendentals

A transcendental is that which surpasses (transcends) other things to the point of being a higher order of being to the extent that all other things are included in it. David Bentley Hart states that a transcendental is “a perfection in which all existing things participate in some degree or other as a necessary condition of their very existence, and a property that in its infinite and absolute reality is convertible with all the other transcendentals . . . and that may therefore be properly regarded as divine names as in some sense pointing to God in himself.”⁴ The basic transcendentals are three: truth,

⁴ David Bentley Hart, “Beauty, Being, and Kenosis: The Aesthetics of the Incarnation,” March 1, 2013, in *Open Biola*, <http://open.biola.edu/resources/beauty-being-and-kenosis-the-aesthetics-of-the->

goodness, and beauty, each corresponding with the properties of being and the three primary domains of human experience: the mind, the will, and the affections.⁵

Since the dawn of Enlightenment, priority of place has been given to the role of truth and goodness in philosophical, theological, and practical discourse. While there remains a common acknowledgment that beauty exists, it is viewed as existing in a domain of its own apart from truth and goodness. The principles of logic and the practices of virtue have shaped public discourse because truth and goodness have been placed at a higher value within the Enlightenment worldview. In part, this is due to the working assumption that what can be examined by the five senses can be analyzed in such a way that it can be proven as public truth. Experiences, feelings, values, beliefs, and religions fall within the realm of personal preference or opinion. Truth and goodness, on the other hand, can be coalesced into abstract forms or lists that can be controlled and reproduced for the sake of public advancement. Therefore, we might say that truth and goodness are viewed as public in nature, while beauty is a private concern.⁶

This is illustrated by the language used in the literature of the missional church surveyed in the previous chapter. The discourse aims at developing a list of principles (which makes it reasonable) or practices (which makes it useful) that can be distilled, explained, and reproduced in multiple settings. The transcendental of beauty does not

incarnation. David Bentley Hart, "Beauty, Being, and Kenosis: The Aesthetics of the Incarnation," <http://open.biola.edu/resources/beauty-being-and-kenosis-the-aesthetics-of-the-incarnation>.

⁵ The history of the philosophy of the transcendentals is long, complex, and varied. Some have identified five transcendentals, however in the wake of the critiques of Kant, truth, goodness, and beauty have shaped the conversation, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*., s.v. "Medieval Theories of Transcendentals," by Jan Aertsen accessed September 12, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentals-medieval>.

⁶ While Lesslie Newbigin did not directly address the topic of aesthetics, the theme of public truth versus private truth is thoroughly explored in Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

lead the aesthetician to ignore or disparage principles or practices; instead it makes space to see through them in order to reveal a deeper reality than what can be expressed through truth and goodness alone. This raises the question of the nature of beauty.

Aesthetics

A clear understanding of aesthetics requires the willingness to embrace paradox. On the one hand, its meaning is quite clear as it is the field of study that deals with what is communicated through art and how that which is communicated is perceived. The various theories and arguments within the technical field of philosophical aesthetics are wide-ranging and quite complex, as they address specific perspectives of artistic style, judgment, taste, and sensory experience. However, running through these theories is a simple, over-arching subject of expressing and perceiving beauty.

There are three basic parts of an aesthetic point of view. First there is the expression of the artist offering beauty, referred to as Poetics in this work. Second, there is the work of art itself, which is described as a Performance that sits between the artist and the one perceiving it. Third, there is the perception of the art that is shaped by Practices adopted by the perceiver.



Figure 10: Expression, Gift, Perception

On the other hand, defining aesthetics or developing a theory of beauty is like trying to capture the wind and put it on display in a museum. As soon as you do so, it is no longer wind. David Bentley Hart writes, “It is impossible . . . to offer a definition of beauty, either in the abstract or in Christian thought.”⁷ Unlike truth and goodness, clearly defining beauty evades our grasp because it relates to that which engages one’s imagination, dealing in the realm of splendor, radiance, mystery, and glory. John Milbank writes, “[T]o see . . . the beautiful is to see the invisible in the visible . . . the hidden divine source irradiating the finite surface.”⁸ It has more to do with what we perceive than it does with analytical definitions and clear propositions. To introduce the category of beauty is to enter into the metaphorical world of “having ears to hear” as Jesus put it, where the truth and goodness that is offered is evocative, but we are not able to fully define how it is so. It invites us into the imaginative world of metaphor, poetry, kinetics, satire, parable, narrative, and experience. Here we find ourselves “using the same words as a child and the simpleminded person but using them metaphorically,”⁹ and thus we are naming truthfulness and goodness but doing so poetically as opposed to analytically or propositionally.

In some sense, we could say that while we don’t know how to define beauty, we know it when we see it. For instance, a Campbell’s Soup can sitting on the kitchen counter is utilitarian, but an Andy Warhol painting of a Campbell’s Soup can evoke

⁷ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 15.

⁸ John Milbank, “Beauty and the Soul,” in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*, ed. John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Edith Wyschogrod (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 2.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 210.

something within us—at least within some—something that can make space in our souls to reflect on what it means to live in modernity where everything is utilitarian. This is not so much a matter of taste, because one can dislike the art of Warhol while at the same time acknowledging that it stirs up something within them. It possesses an aesthetic quality that can make space through the art, poetry, narrative, etc. to express something that cannot be fully analyzed and defined. Balthasar puts it this way: “[A]ll those who have been once affected inwardly by the worldly beauty of either nature, or of a person’s life, or of art, will surely not insist that they have no genuine idea of what beauty is. The beautiful brings with it a self-evidence that en-lightens without mediation.”¹⁰ To speak of aesthetics is to identify our experience of something that moves us to the point of unveiling a reality that cannot be explained or defined. N. T. Wright comments, “[B]eauty is both something that calls us out of ourselves and something which appeals to feelings deep within us.”¹¹ Beauty evokes, stirs, and moves us toward that which is viewed as beautiful. It fulfills while at the same time creating a longing for more of it.

On this note, it must be stated that beauty in the current context is complicated because it overlaps with that which is entertaining or pleasing, and there is much that we find entertaining in the modern world which is not, in fact, beautiful. The entertaining is that which one finds scintillating to the senses and causes a sense of fulfillment in the moment, whereas that which is beautiful evokes something that connects us to something that endures beyond a singular moment. While the senses are involved in both the entertaining and the beautiful, that which falls into the latter is not lost after the moment

¹⁰ Balthasar, 37.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 44.

passes. This distinction is crucial in our present context for two reasons. First, for many in the context of Western modernity, that which is judged as beautiful is only found within the confines of that which is entertaining, which means that one seeks to move from one entertaining experience to the next.¹² Second, there is a pervading expectation that the church will meet the expectation of providing spiritual goods and services that fulfill this habitual need for entertainment.¹³ In order to see the beautiful, we must understand the difference between the scintillating and the beautiful.

Aesthetics provides language to talk about the imagination of the truth and goodness of an expresser along with the imagination of the one who is perceiving the truth and goodness of what is being expressed, within the imaginative and relational context where the expresser and perceiver are relating. This speaks to the experience or “the immediate sensation of gratefulness”¹⁴ as a result of encountering that which is true and good. As such, it is not that which lies beside truth and goodness, but that which lies beneath the surface of truth and goodness.

¹² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). Emil Brunner identifies this as aestheticism, which “makes man a creature who enjoys everything and seeks nothing but enjoyment. The man who is entangled in the net of aestheticism feels no responsibility for his fellow-men . . . he is an aristocrat, he is self-sufficient; . . . True, he desires to have a group of people round him, but he does not wish to serve them, but through their enjoyment he desires to intensify his own, indeed, if they are beautiful or interesting, he wants to enjoy them,” Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), 500-01.

¹³ James V. Brownson, *Stormfront: The Good News of God, The Gospel and Our Culture Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards concludes, “[The] manner of being affected with the immediate presence of the beautiful idea depends not, therefore, on many reasonings about the idea, after we have it, before we can find out whether it be beautiful, or not; but on the frame of our minds whereby they are so made that such an idea, as soon as we have it, is grateful, or appears beautiful.” By this Edwards argued that the beautiful appears agreeable to the point of stirring delight and gratefulness through a direct encounter with the beautiful. The beautiful is not to be justified by the arguments of truth or the consequences of usefulness. It simply is perceived as beautiful. Jonathan Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 619.

Beauty Beneath the Surface

Beauty is not that which is set over and against that which is true and good. Instead it operates in the depth of true and good. This relates to Milbank's claim "[T]o see . . . the beautiful is to see the invisible." Truth and goodness lie on the surface, but the beauty of these things lies at layers that are beneath the surface. Before the Enlightenment, the experience of the invisible being integrated with the visible "was generally assumed and pervaded life, art and understanding."¹⁵ However, upon the turn of modernity, that which is the invisible is viewed as that which is beyond the bounds of the true and the good. Therefore, beauty was relegated to the realm of personal values because it is not part of the visible or perceived experience that can be measured, theoretically assessed, and scientifically proven. We do not make space to be bedazzled by the experience of the visible form to see through it into another reality because we are so focused on the reasonableness and usefulness of that visible form. "Bedazzlement now no longer betokens an excess of saturated form."¹⁶ Therefore beauty, experience, provocation, evocation, attraction, appeal and the like are not viewed as essential to logic or virtue because the invisible exists beyond the bounds of truth and goodness. The following quote by Milbank reframes beauty as that which lies beneath the surface of truth and goodness. The sections following this quote provide a brief commentary on Milbank's words:

Beauty arises where the attraction exercised by a formed reality is ineffable and escapes analysis. We speak of 'beauty' just because we cannot capture this attraction in a formula that would allow us to produce other instances of beauty.

¹⁵ Milbank, 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

For the same reason, we cannot substitute an abstraction of essence for the concrete aesthetic experience.¹⁷

Beauty Arises

Beauty “arises.” It is recognized. It is serendipitous. It happens. It is not produced or controlled. It is experienced as a surprise, a gift, or even a happenstance. It is not that the source of beauty has no control over the work that is done that results in the arising of beauty, as it requires an incredible amount of labor to have the character or the ability to be a source of this serendipity because beauty is not merely random. Yet beauty is something that occurs beyond the work or effort.

To say that beauty arises is to recognize that it does so as an expression in a middle space that resembles a gift. Once the expresser lets go of the gift—art, drama, poetry, etc.—it sits between the expresser and perceiver. The expresser has invested a part of herself into gift in a unique way, but she is not equivalent to that expression. When the perceiver sees the gift, the question then is one of whether or not she has the ability to see it for what it is. The recipient may assume that the work of art, for instance, is merely a print that has been purchased at a flea market, thereby missing the reality that the artist has given of herself. Assuming that the perceiver sees the value of the expression, she fully receives it and is overwhelmed with a sense of being valued by the expresser. Thus beauty arises.

This beauty does not become part of the perceiver. It remains in that space between. The beauty is a part of the expresser as a unique expression, and it is a part of the perceiver as it has been given to her, but it belongs to neither as it “arises” in the

¹⁷ Ibid., 1.

space between. Therefore, that which is beautiful is beyond the control of both the source and the recipient. It is “the invisible in the visible.”

Attraction

The beauty arises as attraction. Aquinas states that beauty is that which “pleases the sight.” One could expand this beyond the visual to all of the senses. We might be attracted to a beautiful song, a well-told story, an aroma of a flowers blooming in Spring, the taste of a favorite meal, the experience of playing a game, or the thought of a hug from a cherished friend. Attraction is the state of being pulled in a direction by something that is perceived, as a magnet is attracted to metal. While there are physical properties that explain why this occurs (the visible), the actual work of attraction is invisible. The metal is simply drawn to the magnet. That which is beautiful and which is perceived as beautiful draws the other toward it.

The experience of attraction depends upon the beauty expressed and the nature of the perception of the perceiver. Quite obviously, there is a spectrum of skill level that ranges from artistic master to pedestrian to revolting. However, the skill of the source is not the only factor in the attraction. There is also the recipient’s ability to perceive the nature of the beauty. This is in part a question of taste or preference, as one might be attracted to a particular style over others. Some, for instance, might perceive the beauty of speed metal, but I have no sensibility to even see its value. But even more, this is about the recipient’s capacity to enter into what has been given by the other. Imagine that a machinist uses his skills to create a unique decorative bowl for his wife. However, because it is made of an alloy that is unknown to her and because she knows that he

created it at his place of work, she interprets it as some kind of tool. She has no framework for perceiving its beauty.

There is one more factor that influences attraction. It is the relationship between the source and the recipient. I might ponder a Van Gogh or sit mesmerized after reading a poem by Maya Angelou, however, I hide drawings and writings of my children in random books in my library so that I will happen upon them in the future. Their artwork or writing causes an attraction to arise within me because of who they are to me.

We might conclude that attraction arises at the point of the invisible through the interplay between what is offered by the expresser, what is perceived by the perceiver and the context in which that which is offered is experienced. The level of attraction experienced in a local setting requires less skill and less ability to perceive the skill because of the relationship between the two parts in the local. The more universal the context, the greater the skill required in order to experience the same level of attraction. This can be illustrated by a production of a musical. If my son is in the production, it can actually be a thing of beauty to me, while someone who knows none of the actors might find it banal. For that person to experience the same level of attraction, the level of quality of the production and his ability to interpret that quality would need to be higher.

Formed Reality

The invisible in the visible arises as a “formed reality.” This is not merely some kind of ethereal, other-worldly experience that is beyond the domain of public truth or goodness. This is an encounter within the reality of the five senses. For instance, an artist will expend extensive energy understanding what is true about paint, paper, and the various aspects of what it takes to make paint do what she wants it to do. And she will

develop practices that will inform her habits and those habits in turn shape her character as an artist. These are concrete principles and practices that open up the possibility of creating something beautiful. Beauty arises out of the formed reality of the visible.

However, the invisible in the visible that comes in the form of paint on a canvas is actually ineffable, or “incapable of being expressed or described in words.” At the same time, when beauty arises we grapple with words to express the attraction. It is not that we don’t use words. We just have to develop a language that actually fits the subject. If we are limited to the domains of truth and goodness, then our language will be analytical or logical in nature. Beauty is not illogical, as it “escapes analysis.” It calls for discourse that taps into the super-logical; that is the discourse of witness.

One can assess the quality of a concert, for instance, but its beauty is beyond analysis. It makes space for the experience of the concert that can only be expressed as a witness to its reality. A music critic can analyze the skill of the musicians, the conductor’s ability to bring the orchestra into synchronicity, and the overall presentation of the music. If it is an original piece, he can assess the musical quality of that which was performed. However, to speak to the beauty of the concert, he must give witness to what he experienced by giving voice to what arose in him, that is the degree to which he was attracted or repelled by the music.

Irreproducible

The invisible in the visible cannot be captured “in a formula that would allow us to produce other instances of beauty.” Once we move beyond analysis, we see that that which arises as attractive cannot be named as a set of principles or a list of actions that can be reproduced in order to replicate such beauty. If we work within the realm of truth,

we can identify the logic of what is being assessed, one that can be named and reproduced. The same is true of goodness, as one can identify a set of practices that can be adopted in order to produce a virtuous *telos*. While not negating the importance of truth or goodness, beauty opens up the possibilities that there is something beyond one's grasp that actually results in beauty. For instance, while one might study Van Gogh, dissect what he painted, how he painted, and do all in the same way that he did, no one could reproduce what he could do. In other words, a student of Van Gogh would only be able to produce their own kind of beauty.

The experience of beauty cannot be reduced to abstract principles. However, this is exactly what we try to do with church and leadership literature. We dissect what it means to be the kind of church that we find appealing and then we identify principles and practices that we can implement and then we get to work. This only gets us as far as making space for the possibility of beauty.

Expressing the Beauty of an Innovation

The transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty relate to how an innovation is introduced and diffused within a system. The common responses people have to an innovation depends upon how one understands its truthfulness, its goodness, and its beauty. The philosopher Roger Scruton writes: "Why believe *p*? Because it is true. Why want *x*? Because it is good. Why look at *y*? Because it is beautiful. In some way, philosophers have argued, those answers are on par: each bring a state of mind into the ambit of reason, by connecting it to something that it is in our nature, as rational beings, to pursue."¹⁸ First, one must see the surface-level veracity of the innovation in that it

¹⁸ Scruton, 2.

offers something that is more true than other options. Secondly, if the innovation offers visible evidence of goodness or justice that corresponds with what one values, then it is will be viewed as offering a better option. Third, if a person sees a beauty through the veneer of the innovation, it will be more likely adopted because it will be viewed as attractive and pleasing. Like a work of art that offers an unexpected insight into some aspect of life, an insight that cannot be fully articulated but causes a person to see something about the world that cannot be seen otherwise, so too an innovation is more likely to be embraced when an adopter sees through the surface of the truth and goodness of the innovation into that which cannot be fully expressed. Balthasar comments about aesthetics:

A great work of art appears like an original creation, an inexplicable miracle on the stage of history. Just as no sociological law can predict the day of its arrival, neither can any law explain it in retrospect. Of course, the work of art has its presuppositions without which it cannot come into being: such conditions may be effective stimuli but do not provide a full explanation of the work itself.¹⁹

With regard to seeing the beauty of an innovation, there are attributes of a specific innovation that make the beauty of the innovation perceptible. In his classic book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, Everett Rogers identifies five perceived attributes that affects the adoption of an innovation. They are:²⁰

- Relative Advantage: “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being better than the idea it supersedes.” The greater the perceived relative advantage of the missional church, the faster the speed of adoption.
- Compatibility: “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters.” The greater the perceived compatibility of the missional church to previous expressions of the church, the easier it is to adopt it.

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 116.

²⁰ Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 212-44.

- Complexity: “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as relatively difficult to understand and use.” The higher the perceived complexity the slower the rate of adoption.
- Trialability: “the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. New ideas that can be tried on the installment plan are generally adopted more rapidly than innovations that are not divisible.”
- Observability: “the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others.” The higher the degree of observability, the more quickly an innovation is adopted.

These attributes pertain to the ability of potential adopters to look through the surface to “perceive” the innovation as attractive and pleasing.²¹ Truth and goodness work together with beauty as a generative triad to provide an understanding of an innovation. If we leave any of the three out, we are unable to observe the innovation for what it is and therefore we will be more likely to reject it. John W. de Gruchy writes,

Truth without goodness and beauty degenerates into dogmatism, and lacks the power to attract and convince; goodness without truth is superficial, and without beauty—that is without graced from—it degenerates into moralism. Alternatively, we could say that truth and goodness without beauty lack power to convince and therefore to save.²²

To observe that which is true and good about missional church, we must perceive its beauty, and if the beauty is not inherent to that which has been determined as true and good, then seeing new aspects of beauty will shift the truth and goodness of missional church that has been proposed to this point. In other words, when we ask questions of the aesthetics of missional church, we will begin to talk about it (truth) and practice it (goodness) differently.

²¹ This is not a statement about whether beauty is merely a matter of taste or personal preference as opposed to beauty as an attribute within the innovation itself. This is a question that extends beyond that which can be addressed in this thesis. See Scruton.

²² De Gruchy, 107.

To continue this, de Gruchy writes, “The true and the good are not primarily perceived by the rational faculties as propositions and principles: they are experienced through hearing and seeing, through intuition and imagination.”²³ This is not to elevate beauty to a higher position to that of truth and goodness, or imagination over doctrine and practicing goodness. It calls for an expanded conversation that corresponds with how we are created to live, therefore moving the innovation of missional church from the domains of thinking and acting to that of being.

Perceiving the Beauty of an Innovation

The ability that a person has to perceive the value of an innovation is, in part, shaped by a paradigm that sets up expectations for what we hear and understand. It is the story that shapes how we view life. The concept of paradigms was applied by Thomas Kuhn, a physicist, to the advancement of ideas in the field of science. He found that scientific knowledge does not progress simply through incremental addition of new abstract information on top of old information. Instead, scientific research is interpreted through a paradigmatic story which explains how the data works. When the data cannot be fully interpreted by an established paradigm, then new theories are explored that eventually lead to the development of a new paradigm. Kuhn writes that a paradigm is “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.”²⁴ This is akin to a hermeneutic, a worldview, or a “social construction of reality.”²⁵ As such, paradigms work as a kind of hidden operating system,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kuhn, 175.

²⁵ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

always running but never overtly articulated, that is until they fall short. Paradigms operate as imaginative filters that allow individuals to see characteristics of an innovation while hindering their ability to see others. Kuhn argued that science developed through paradigms shifts, or revolutions, where a new interpretive model organized and explained observations better than the previous one.

When an innovation like missional church is introduced in a church, the paradigm that leaders bring with them to the conversation impacts their ability to perceive its beauty. The innovation is interpreted through established paradigms about the way that church should and should not work.²⁶ This is related to aesthetics, as a person's experiences shape how they see or perceive the innovation. Previous experiences within an established paradigm cause one to view an innovation in relationship to that paradigm, and when pastoral leaders do this, they turn the proposals of missional church into something that it is not. Instead, the new paradigm of missional church requires an imagination that fits what it is so that it becomes the new lens through which the facts are interpreted.

One of the reasons we fail to understand the paradigm of missional church on its own terms is that we do not have an accurate framework of how new paradigms are introduced to a system in such a way that best facilitates perception, understanding, and adoption. Often people make the mistake of trying to introduce an innovation into an entire system at once. However, this ignores the fact that people respond to innovations in different ways. In other words, most people find paradigm shifts threatening. A new idea

²⁶ The five views of missional church introduced in chapter two illustrate this point. Instead of missional church serving as a paradigm to interpret the facts that do not any longer align with established ways of doing church, many hold on to the old paradigms and feed new ideas about the mission of God through what they already know.

is of value only if it improves what we already know how to do. A new idea that requires us to do things in a different way will be rejected at first by most simply because it is different.

How People Perceive an Innovation

Everett Rogers was a sociologist who originated the field of diffusion of innovations. He spent a lifetime researching how innovations were disseminated into social systems, whether it was the adoption of a new seed corn in the farming industry or the process by which rap music entered into the mainstream. He used the standard deviation bell curve to organize how people respond to an innovation.²⁷

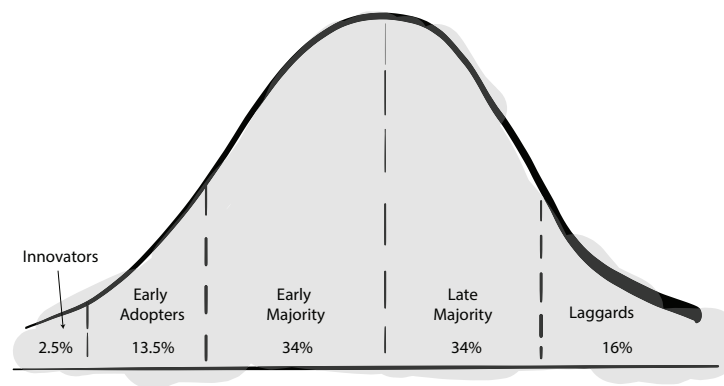


Figure 11: Innovation Bell Curve

Innovators love experiments because they tend to be obsessed with being venturesome. They challenge the status quo and expand the current boundaries by introducing new ideas. While not all of their ideas are practical or workable, their concern is to explore new territory. Innovators make many mistakes because they will adopt new ideas simply because they are new. Innovators are able to visualize a new idea without ever seeing it. They do not need to increase their dissatisfaction with current reality,

²⁷ Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 262-66.

because they are always dissatisfied with the old. They continually feel a sense of urgency and embrace change just because it is change.

Early Adopters are characterized by respectability. They are ahead of the pack, but not too far ahead. Therefore, they have the greatest degree of influence upon others in the church, and an experiment cannot survive without the Early Adopters. These are the people learn how an experiment works and then turn it into action.

Those in the Early Majority are deliberate individuals who make up one third of the population. They adhere to the motto, “Be not the first by which the new is tried, nor the last to lay the old aside.”²⁸ They will follow with deliberate willingness, but they will seldom lead. As such, they are not prime suspects of the early stages of experimentation.

It takes longer for members of the Early Majority to see the value of a new idea. They need time to process current reality and a leader who will make them feel safe in this process. They have a limited ability to understand a new vision by reading about it or seeing it at another church. Primarily they need to experience it after someone else has worked out a few of the kinks. They will follow people they trust into a new vision and then they will take it on as their own.

Late Majority. Making up another third of the population, these people view new ideas with skepticism and caution. The pressure of peers and obvious circumstantial pointers must lead them to see the necessity of change before they will change. Because those in the Late Majority category only adopt a new idea after other people are doing it and thereby proving it successful, you cannot expect this group to place any value on experiments until they are actually no longer classified as experiments.

²⁸ Ibid., 265.

Laggards are the last to adopt new ideas, as they are traditional and their reference point is in the past. They tend to be suspicious of the new and those who promote new ideas. This group rarely feels an urgency to change until they realize that they are being left behind. They will change only because everyone else has.

In most cases it is not hard to identify those who fall into the Innovator or Early Adopter categories. They are often those who are never satisfied even when things are going well. They are reading books that talk about things differently and seeking new ways to do things. These are the people who must be given the freedom to lead the charge through experiments.

These people may or may not be the stakeholders who sit in positions of power in a church. In younger, more flexible churches, the stakeholders might very well respond to innovations well. However, in established congregations, stakeholders are typically stable, centered people who usually fall into the middle adopter categories.

These categories demonstrate how people within an organization respond to innovations in different ways and therefore adopt them at different rates. The further one is to the right of the bell curve, the longer it will take for a person to understand, much less buy into, a new way of doing church.

Hindrances to Perception

Understanding how one perceives beauty requires an understanding of the factors that hinders their ability to be bedazzled by it. These factors often are sourced in a politic that is inherently ugly and causes people to misperceive beauty, sometimes naming that which is inherently evocative as inherently repulsive. The social critic and political philosopher Slavoj Žižek provides tools to equip people to perceive patterns of life—

politics—that are in fact ugly. Seeing that which is repulsive requires a deep listening to the imagination that shapes the way of life of a social entity. Being that this thesis addresses the life of a church, this means that the politic of a local congregation, and therefore its degree of beauty, is not found in its public confessions, belief statements, or vision and strategy documents. Instead, we must look at the invisible and perceive what is going on in its hidden patterns of life.

The primary tool that Žižek offers for interpreting the politic of group, whether a country, a business, or a volunteer organization, is that of ideology, which is simply a “the set of ideas by which a people make sense of their social world by covering over certain unwanted features of their governed social existence.”²⁹ An ideology is basically a set of beliefs that shapes how a people gather, live together, and cooperate. For Žižek, a political view of ideology recognizes that these organizing beliefs are, in fact, empty.³⁰ They are beliefs that the group holds, but they do not actually believe them to be true. This is illustrated by the way that Americans fall for the promises of change made by presidential candidates, but in fact no one expects much to actually change. This is because an ideology is not based on a governing truth, even though one might hold to some kind of verbiage that is supposed to guide the actions of the organization. However, the way of life of that organization reveals something different.

For Žižek, every politic is governed not by what it stands for but by what it stands against. In other words, the way of life of a given group is shaped by an ideology of antagonism. This is illustrated by the history of the church where new denominations are

²⁹ Fitch and Holsclaw, 202.

³⁰ This section draws from the interpretation by Fitch, *The End of Evangelicalism?: Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission: Towards an Evangelical Political Theology*, 19-47.

launched because one group cannot coexist with an established group. In fact, much of the missional conversation has erupted out of distain and frustration for the established patterns of church life. When groups develop out of this ideology, they do so out of antagonism.

Žižek argues that people need what he calls master signifiers to support their ideologies. These are empty statements that a group of people rally around but what they actually mean is actually up for grabs.³¹ For instance, a politician rallies people around a slogan but no one actually knows what such a slogan means. The same thing happens in the church when strategists argue for the call to “make disciples” claiming that Jesus’ last command has been ignored in the past and that now they have heard the call and have the “right” strategy for obeying that command. However, if one surveys the history of church strategies, this mantra has been preached, taught, and written about for decades. In addition, churches actually have been making disciples because church leaders have been modeling a way of church life that others have followed. Everyone agrees that the church should focus on making disciples, but no one can actually name what that is.

The same could be said about the missional church. Few would argue that the church should not be missional, but to actually name what it means is much more difficult. So being missional becomes an “empty signifier,” a rallying cry for the call of the church to operate in a different way, while it continues to do what it has always been doing. The missional church in this view is more about railing against what it is not by

³¹ Žižek writes, “Suffice it to recall how a community functions: the Master Signifier which guarantees the community’s consistency is a signifier whose signified is an enigma for the members themselves—nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presupposes that others know, that it has to mean ‘the real thing,’ so they use it all the time,” Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why the Christian Legacy Is Worth Fighting For* (London: Verso, 2000), 114.

blaming church leaders, undermining inherited traditions, and even castigating Constantine than about participating in God's mission.

Žižek extends this antagonistic ideology even further by introducing the idea of *jouissance*, a French word that refers to excessive and even irrational enjoyment when an other experiences failure.³² Because groups gather around what they are against, they take sick pleasure when those who support what they are against fail.

This very basic introduction to the complex thought of Žižek provides a lens to assess how that which is repulsive has informed the way a local congregation has operated, how the job of the pastoral leaders has been shaped, and how volunteer leaders perceive their roles. More specifically, it provides a way to identify the way beauty is lacking or even absent, even when truth and goodness are overtly present. The pastor and the core volunteer leaders of a church work from within the truth and goodness of missional church, but because it operates not from beauty but from a politic of emptiness, the leaders may very well lead from a place of manipulation.

How Practices Influence Perception

The capacity to see the “invisible in the visible” or the lack thereof is shaped by the practices that are inherent to the politic in which we live. Therefore, to have one's sight formed requires practices. The eminent ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre set the commonly-accepted definition of a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence

³² *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 201-05.

which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends of goods involved, are systematically extended.”³³

These words deserve further comment. First, a practice is adopted with a specific end in mind, which is being “systematically extended.” Doing the practice, in and of itself, is not the goal, but it is appropriate to the movement toward the goal, which relates to the question of the lived theology of missional church. The *telos* proposed in this project is that of being a missional church as defined by the beauty of God. The goal is the perceiving of and joining in on what God is doing by the presence of the Spirit to redeem all things.

Second, there are “standards of excellence” that are appropriate to, or correspond with, this *telos*. Jonathan Edwards used the word “excellence” as a synonym for beauty.³⁴ The end of beauty is the standard of excellence toward which we are moving and therefore the practices are in service to this standard. The practices in and of themselves are not the goal. When the practices become the focus, then we lose sight of the beauty that is going on beneath the surface. The specific practices that align with the goal of beauty cannot be fixed or prescribed because beauty is inherently relational and contextual. Instead, the actual practices adopted will be determined by many factors, including the local context, tradition, and local history of a specific congregation.

³³ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

³⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “The Mind,” in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

Third, the reference to the “human powers” is about the idea that one has the character at the level of his or her being to live into the *telos* and its excellence. This is not merely something that one works to make happen through effort. It is about the development of a disposition or character that corresponds with the *telos*. Hauerwas puts it this way:

To emphasize the idea of character is to recognize that our actions are also acts of self-determination; in them we not only reaffirm what we have been but also determine what we will be in the future. By our actions we not only shape a particular situation, we also form ourselves to meet future situations in a particular way. Thus the concept of character implies that moral goodness is primarily a prediction of persons and not acts, and that this goodness of persons is not automatic but must be acquired and cultivated.³⁵

This idea of character challenges us to go beyond *working harder to make the telos transpire*. It is not something we produce. Nor is it “automatic.” Instead, through practices, the character or the disposition that aligns with the *telos* is “acquired and cultivated.” The practices adopted might not produce the desired results in the short term, but they have a direct bearing on its ability to perform the *telos* in the future.

A fourth observation is that practices are “socially embodied.” While there are individualistic elements to practices, they are performed in, and informed by, one’s social reality. Beauty is social; it cannot be realized in isolation. “Practices are communal habits, engaged intentionally both to form the community in ways appropriate to that community’s mission and to witness to that mission.”³⁶

³⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1974), 49.

³⁶ Kristopher Norris, *Pilgrim Practices: Discipleship for a Missional Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 10.

Fifth, MacIntyre's language of "... trying to achieve ..." speaks to the decisions and choices one makes regarding where they place their efforts. Practices requires attention, focus, and concentrated repetition especially in the early stages. Over time, the practices move beyond things one does. In a way, they become part of us. "After a time, the primary point about the practice is no longer that they are something we do," Dykstra notes. "Instead, they become arenas in which something is done to us, in us, and through us that we could not of ourselves do, that is beyond what we do."³⁷ As practices are repeated, habits are "acquired and cultivated" and over time they may appear "automatic" because we do them without consciously thinking about them.

The more people enter into practices that align with the innovation, the more they are able to perceive its beauty because those practices form their character to enter into the inside of what they are perceiving.

The Process of Growing in Perception

An innovation is not diffused through a system through the dissemination of information alone as the adoption of an innovation involves a process of entering into the imagination of that innovation. Knowing about the innovation that requires a paradigm shift does not mean that one has actually shifted their paradigm. Instead, we must think in terms of how one grows in their ability to perceive an innovation, or their ability to see the beauty of a new paradigm.

Rogers found that individuals go through an innovation-diffusion process, one that "passes from knowledge of an innovation to forming an attitude toward the

³⁷ Craig R. Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 66.

innovation, to a decision to adopt or reject, to implementation of the new idea, and to confirmation of this decision.”³⁸ He illustrates it this way:

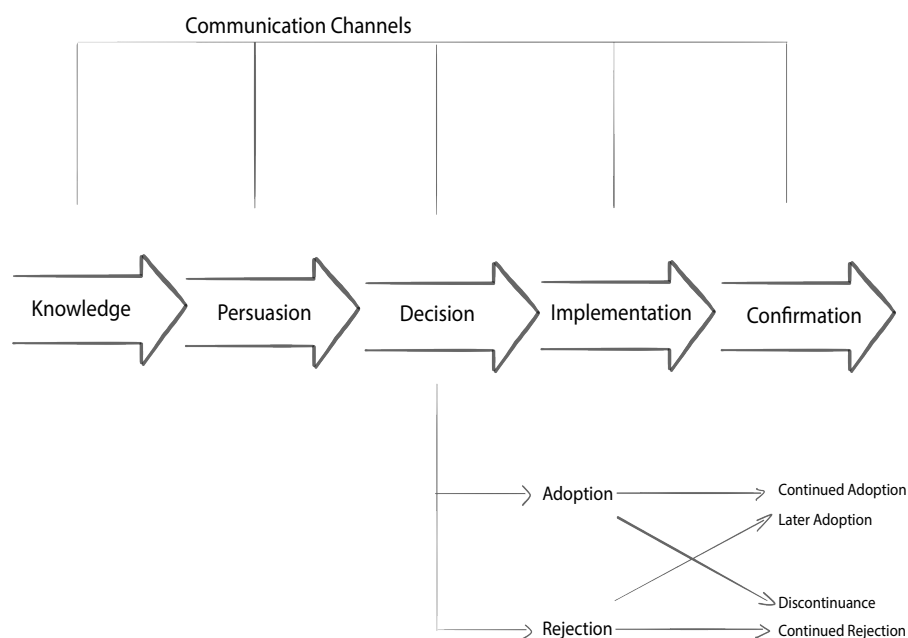


Figure 12: Growing in Perception

Innovators and early adopters move through this process more quickly than those who fall in the middle categories. Those on the far right of the bell curve, of course, most often only move through the process when the old established patterns are completely defunct.

An understanding of God’s expansive beauty makes space for all of these responses to innovations and change because, from a theological point of view, God does not need to force people to respond positively to what he is doing in the world. Instead, he invites people to join him at a rate that is appropriate to the way that a person is made. The other has the freedom to explore what God is doing in such a way that one “gets to” enter into it, as opposed to “having to” line up with the shift. There is space for each

³⁸ Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 163.

individual to enter into honest dialogue about the innovation without that dialogue posing any threat, because God is in no way threatened by push back. In fact, the only way to participate in the way of God's being is to fully enter into honest push back.

This recognition that people respond to innovations in different ways also makes room for those who love to explore new ideas through experimentation when new ideas are not fully developed, or even understandable. This requires faith on the part of those who adopt the innovation in its infancy because neither the logic (truth) nor the practices (goodness) have been fully developed. The observations about paradigm shifts in science made by Kuhn are helpful:

The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem-solving. He must, that is, have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few. A decision of that kind can only be made by faith.³⁹

Those who adopt the innovation cannot fully justify their decisions with a list of reasons as to why the new is better than the old. In many ways, the innovation is adopted on aesthetics grounds. Those who adopt it in the early stages are able to see its inherent beauty without fully being able to explain why it is beautiful.

As innovators and early adopters move through the innovation-diffusion process, they become the experimental models that communicate to others what the innovation means. One of the basic principles of diffusion of innovation theory is that people respond best to an innovation when they are exposed to it from someone one category away. Therefore, it is very difficult for innovators to communicate an innovation well to middle adopters. Instead the people are invited to move through the innovation-diffusion

³⁹ Kuhn, 159.

process in stages that are appropriate to their level of response to change. For instance, if five people have taken six months to a year in a missional church experiment of some kind, their experience serves as a witness to the viability of the innovation.⁴⁰ Instead of depending upon a text written by an expert, the witness to the experiment provides a living text for others to see. Then as ten to fifteen move through the process, others see how it works. At the risk of over-simplifying the process, innovators communicate to early adopters and then early adopters communicate to the middle adopters.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the topic of aesthetics in relation to truth and goodness, which has been the primary language of the missional church. Beauty is seeing “the invisible in the visible” as John Milbank proposed, or as will become clear in the chapters that follow, it is about seeing beneath the surface of the mere facts. It is not about eschewing truth and goodness; it is about looking through the veneer to see what is going on. This involves a basic understanding of three parts of aesthetics: the expression of art, the art that is given, and the perception of that art. The expression relates to various forms of art that will be called Poetics in this project. The art that is given is a Performance that lies in the empty space between the one who expressed the Poetics and the one who is seeking to perceive it. And the perception is shaped by Practices. These three parts, Poetics, Performance, and Practices frame the aesthetics of God as will be explored in the next chapter.

⁴⁰ Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014).

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGICAL LENSES: REIMAGINING *MISSIO DEI*

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced aesthetics from a philosophical perspective and made some basic connections to how beauty influences the adoption of an innovation. This chapter explores aesthetics from theological and biblical perspectives.¹ This is a question about the being of God, and therefore a question about God's missional ontology. This chapter answers the question, What is the expression and perception of *missio Dei* that is shaped by beauty? The answer to this question reframes the *telos* of the missional church, and it paves the way for understanding the roles of missional leaders who promote this beauty. The ultimate *telos* of God must define the *telos* of the church. That *telos* is the beauty of God. In the following illustration, the image to the far right represents God's beauty toward which the missional church is moving.

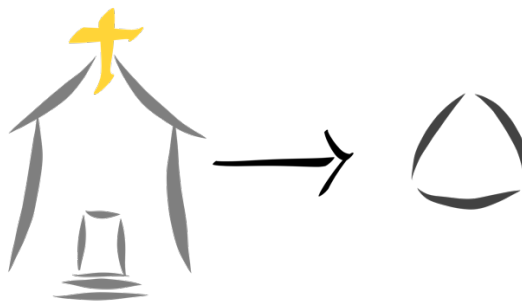


Figure 13: The Telos of Divine Beauty

¹ Note: The theological and biblical lenses will be integrated in this chapter, as opposed to being treated separately.

This chapter explores three lenses that derive from theological aesthetics: The Poetics of *Missio Dei*, the Performance of *Missio Dei*, and the Practices of *Missio Dei*. All three are based in the beauty of God that serves as the *telos* of the church.

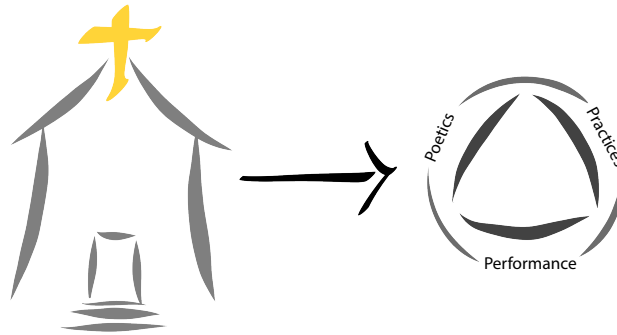


Figure 14: The Lenses of Beauty

By placing theological aesthetics in conversation with the *missio Dei*, we can see how the church can only be missional to the degree that it participates in the Poetics of God (*imago Dei*), the Performance of God (*crucis Dei*), and the Practices of God (*capax Dei*);² that is the missional church will be beautiful to the extent that the church has the capacity to perceive and participate in an image of God that aligns with the revelation of cross. The Poetics, Performance, and Practices clarify the *telos* that is the beauty of God.

The Poetics of God—*Missio Dei*?

The absence of beauty in the lived theologies of missional church is related to some of the challenges of the theology of *missio Dei*. Re-expressing the Poetics of *missio Dei* through the lens of theological aesthetics is best done with an honest view of the historical development of *missio Dei* that hinders the perception of its beauty.

² Image of God, the crucifixion of God, and the capacity for God.

Hindrance #1: Ambiguity Regarding the Meaning of *Missio Dei*

The historical development of the doctrine *missio Dei* has been surveyed extensively by missiologists. According to Van Gelder, this doctrine developed into two basic strands. The first he calls the “specialized view” where the church shifts from a view of internal development to one where the church is called and sent into the world for the sake of the redemption of the world. Here the church is the conduit of God’s grace to the world. The second he gives the label “generalized secular view.” In this theological argument, God is on mission through the development of secular history. The work of God is primarily found in the transformation of cultures outside the church. Van Gelder writes, “The *missio Dei* had come to be identified with a process of historical transformation whereby humankind would gradually achieve the goals of the messianic kingdom through the processes of secular history.”³ One stream focuses on participating in God’s work through the church, while the other focuses on the advancement of culture in the context outside the church.

This divergence in meaning is extended further as all five of the contemporary authors used in the historical survey of the development of missional church employ the language of *missio Dei*. Ed Stetzer writes, “The concept of *missio Dei*, the mission of God, is the recognition that God is a sending God, and the church is sent . . . From our understanding of the *missio Dei* . . . God’s people are to participate in the divine mission to manifest and advance God’s kingdom on earth through the means of sharing and

³ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, 31.

showing the gospel of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ."⁴ Reggie McNeal proposes, "The *missio Dei* is redemptive. It anticipates not only the prayer that Jesus taught his followers to pray, that the will of God would be done on earth as it is in heaven, but that we would be involved in God's response."⁵ For Alan Hirsch, *missio Dei* pertains to what he calls the missional impulse of God and the church. He writes, "It is in essence an outwardly bound movement from one community or individual to another. It is the outward thrust rooted in God's mission that compels the church to reach a lost world."⁶ David Fitch defines it this way, "*Missio Dei* means that God is already at work in our lives and the lives of all around us. . . . [This doctrine] points us squarely into the middle of this world where God is, discerning where God is working, knowing what God has done in the past continues into the present—not as something that we must do but as something God is always already doing."⁷ Alan Roxburgh only uses *missio Dei* in one place in his writings. Here he employs the language to challenge the notion that the gospel is about meeting needs of Christians when he proposes, "*Missio Dei* calls us to see that God is up to something radically different than we imagined and that there is another vibrant, powerful, awesome river steaming toward us. . . . The *missio Dei* is the understanding of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection that is centered on God rather than on meeting personal needs."⁸

⁴ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches That Multiply* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 19.

⁵ McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 21.

⁶ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*, 138.

⁷ Fitch and Holsclaw, 28-30.

⁸ Roxburgh and Boren, 70.

While *missio Dei* language is used extensively, its meaning is less clear. As a result, with Flett, I argue that “*Missio Dei* is a Roschach test. It encourages projection, revealing our own predilections rather than informing and directing our responses.”⁹ Using the language of social analysis, it is an empty signifier that we fill with meaning depending upon *a priori* perceptions. To claim that God is a missionary God and that the church is called to be a missionary congregation is such that no one can disagree with its surface meaning. We can confess our agreement even though it lacks specificity, and as a result, the church can continue doing church in a way that the people already know how to do. They just call it “participation in God’s mission.”¹⁰

The reality, though, is that the differences revealed by our lived theologies of missional church—as illustrated in chapter two—point not only to different perspectives of *missio Dei*, but also to differences in their imagination about the “God” of mission.

⁹ Flett, 76.

¹⁰ Michael Stroope argues in his *Transcending Mission* that the language domain of “mission” including its cognates like “missional,” “missionary,” and “mission-shaped” is actually misguided and that it should be abandoned. About *missio Dei* he concludes, “As an inexact and thus vague, concept, *missio Dei* is a wide gate through which almost any concern, issue, or cause can traffic—ecclesiology, ecology, ecumenics, liberation, justice. . . . *Missio Dei* is everywhere and means everything,” Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 18.

He concludes that “missional has become an inexact, wide-ranging term that colors everything with a missional hue. . . . The adjective excess of missional tends to conflate meaning and produces redundancy. . . . [I]t is the least helpful of mission-related terms” (21). Then he argues about “missional church” language that “this movement has reinvigorated the use of mission language, at the same time it has added to the ambiguity and murkiness surrounding mission. Missional is still mission language, and thus, it shares the same legacy and carries with it many of the same problems and liabilities of the modern mission tradition” (351-352).

To address the problem of the murkiness of the mission language he proposes the language of “pilgrim witnesses to the kingdom.” While his proposal of “pilgrim witnesses to the kingdom” is a valid option for talking about God’s way of working in the world, he does not actually address the theological imagination that lies behind the language. This is most clearly illustrated by his analysis of the missional church conversation where he bases his assessment not upon the theology that informs the meaning that fills the phrase missional church, but upon confusion that arises out of the use of the adjective “missional.” After he tears down the entire tradition of the language of “mission,” he merely develops a new language, without using “mission,” “missional,” or “mission-shaped.” After all, a “rose by any other name” is still a rose. Therefore, the language is new, but the imagination that gives it meaning remains intact.

They perceive the mission of God in the world as being different because there is a lack of clarity about the God who is on mission to redeem all things.

Hindrance #2: *Missio Dei* as Cultural Imperialism

Missio Dei theology and missiology was developed according to the inherited tradition—with its politic and corresponding practices—that has developed in the West. *Missio Dei* was viewed through the imagination of the Western God working through a Western church that is to serve as the form of church to be superimposed upon every context. John Flett labels this as “church as culture,” which refers to the imperialistic exportation of church culture as has been established by the West without regard to the context where the gospel is being announced. As a result, mission becomes the continuing performance of the church as it is known. Flett argues that “emphasizing the cultivation of the faith to the marginalization of mission privileges culture as the mode of the church’s continuity through time and thus privileges established structures and artifacts deemed basic to this culture.”¹¹ The goal of mission then is to cultivate the Western way of performing church in such a way that any communication of the gospel is about getting those reached incorporated into the practices of the established church culture. Flett observes that some go so far as to argue that since the Spirit has been at work through the history of the church as it has been developed in the West, to be converted is, by necessity and by God’s design, to be converted into the established church culture. Because the church has been formed in a Western context, then to be a

¹¹ John G. Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 47.

part of the ongoing work of the Spirit is to be enculturated into that Western expression of the gospel.¹²

While Flett is primarily deconstructing the practices of imperialism as it relates to international missions, this also applies to the fluid and multi-dimensional contexts in which churches in the West find themselves. Exporting the known version of the Western church in adapting contextual situations in the West is akin to moving organs to the jungles of Central America so that new Christians can learn to glorify God with Bach.

Lamin Sanneh uses the contrast between global Christianity and world Christianity to make this point. The first assumes that the Western expressions of church are fixed in such a way that the tradition forms a historical culture that is part of the Spirit's work and therefore for others to be a part of that culture, the other must enter into the life of that culture. This keeps the church disengaged from the reality of its context. World Christianity, Sanneh writes, "is not one thing, but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case, without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame."¹³ In other words, the expressions of church performance arise out of contextual engagement, not as a predetermined product that the church establishment promotes to a context.

Hindrance #3: The Absence of *Dei* in *Missio Dei*

In both the literature of theology of mission, and that of the lived theology of the missional church, there is agreement that the mission is God's mission, that the church is

¹² Flett argues that this is the approach to mission promoted by Robert Jenson, *ibid.*, 103-37.

¹³ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 23.

invited to participate in God's mission, and that mission involves some form of the work of God in all creation. The assumption is that the doctrine of *missio Dei* informs the lived theology of *missio Dei*. The sent and sending nature of God defines God's being and therefore the sent and sending being of God defines the being of the church. However, in reality, the experience of mission is projected upon our understanding of *missio Dei* and therefore upon our perception of the ontology of God. For instance, if one's experience of mission is shaped by a lived theology of personal salvation then that will be projected upon the theology of mission, and that theology of mission will define the way that *missio Dei* is understood (this experience leads some to align with the teachings of Ed Stetzer). If one views the mission of God as primarily about personal conversion, then the mission of the church is to put its efforts toward the work of sharing the message of the gospel so that people will have the opportunity respond. As a result, when those who have this experience of mission say that the church is missional in its nature, the basic meaning is that the essential being or *telos* of mission is to reach the lost.

The problem is that the *missio Dei* is defined by the phenomenology of "*missio*," as the particular way that one imagines the "*missio*" is the way that one defines the being of God. God does not define the mission. The phenomenon of church and mission shapes perception which in turn defines the framework of expression. In other words, our lived theology shapes our view of missional church which shapes our imagination about *missio Dei*.¹⁴

¹⁴ We could illustrate something similar with other defining metaphors used of God. For instance, consider the statement "God is love." When this is proclaimed to a person who has been abused by an authority figure who told them that their abuse was a sign of love, they will imagine or project their experience of love onto God. That is the way the imagination works. We do not speak or hear words with an abstract lexicon. We use words aesthetically. To understand the love that God is, one must take on a new imagination that is shaped by God's kind of love. We do not start with our aesthetic experience of love and

To talk about the *missio Dei*, or mission of God, we do not begin with mission. We begin with God. God's performance of mission in Christ is the defining expression through which the church perceives *missio Dei*, which in turn names the *telos* of the missional church and sets the parameters for missional leadership. This prepares the ground for understanding how theological aesthetics pertains to *missio Dei*.

Theological Aesthetics

Missio Dei is a confession that mission is intrinsic to the nature of God's being. God is a sending God. However, what is less clear is the character of this sending. The way one perceives this character will define the pattern they employ in being sent. The "church as culture" model of imperialistic mission is based on an imagination about the character of the God who sends in this way. Theological aesthetics provides a grid that forces the perceiver to begin with the God who sends as an alternative to the projection of human experience of mission upon God's missional being. If the being of God is ultimately beautiful, glorious, and full of splendor, the perception of God's beauty will reframe the common expressions of *missio Dei*, and as a result the missional ontology and practices of the church. As Jonathan Edwards argued, "As he is every way the first and supreme, and as his excellency is in all respects the supreme beauty and glory, the original good, and fountain of all good; so he must have in all respects the supreme regard."¹⁵ "In all respects" God is "supreme beauty and glory," which includes the "respects" of what it means for the church to be missional. Edwards's stance is especially

then work toward God. We start with God's performance of love and allow that to define our aesthetic experience.

¹⁵ Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," 424.

helpful because he developed his theology through the lens of beauty. Jenson argues that he took the unique stance in the history of theology by explicating the way that “God is truth and goodness because he is beauty.”¹⁶

Balthasar provides this clarification: “Before the beautiful—no, not really before but within the beautiful—the whole person quivers. He not only ‘finds’ the beautiful moving, rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it.”¹⁷ The beautiful stirs up something within us that is beyond us because it is unnecessary, excessive, and pure joy. That which is beautiful is that which Greg Boyd describes as being “more than necessary.”¹⁸ An act that is “more than *necessary*” is not required in order for the source of the beauty to be beautiful. It is overflow, play, dance, and music. At the same time, because it is “*more* than necessary,” the act overflows out of the being that defines the ontological character of the source.

While there are many layers to theological aesthetics, those most relevant to this study on what it means for the missional church to participate in the triune God are threefold. First, theological aesthetics speaks to the Poetics of God’s beauty, the character of the being from which the act of mission flows. Secondly, it addresses the specific Performance of God’s beauty and glory revealed on the cross. Thirdly, it informs the Practices of mission, which directly relates to the ultimate *telos* of the missional church. The church finds itself in a three-way conversation between Poetics, Performance, and Practices, searching for a way that is defined by the beauty of the cross, which flows from

¹⁶ Jenson, 1: 235.

¹⁷ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form*, 247.

¹⁸ Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics*, 392.

the being of God—the source of all things—and aligns with the *telos* of God—the ultimate end of all things.

The Poetics of *Missio Dei*

A common foundational claim in missional church literature is that God is a “fountain of sending love” as David Bosch alleged.¹⁹ The mission of *God* is rooted in the kind of God that God is because God’s acts *ad extra* flow out of God’s being *ad intra*. For the sake of illustration, imagine the following as a representation of who God is as Father-Son-Spirit.²⁰

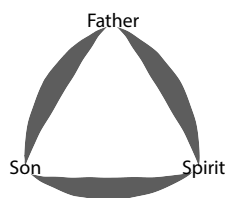


Figure 15: Imago Dei

If this image represents the being of God, then the way that God works in the world on mission will reflect this image because God does not work in a way that is other than the way that God is. The *imago Dei* defines the *missio Dei*. Theological aesthetics offers a helpful lens for clarifying the kind of mission that is God’s. The beauty that the church expresses as it engages the world in mission will never extend beyond the beauty in which it lives. Derivatively, the beauty in which a church lives will directly correspond with the beauty of the God it perceives.

¹⁹ Bosch, 390.

²⁰ My argument at this point does not depend upon adopting a specific theory of the Trinity *ad intra*. I am not beginning with a specific view of the immanent Trinity. I am only building on the confession of the historical Church that God is Triune. The nature of the immanent God that I am espousing will be clarified in the following section.

The missional expression of a particular congregation will be beautiful to the extent that those within that congregation possess a picture of God that is befitting to the image of God's revelation of distinctive beauty as Father-Son-Spirit. Jonathan Edwards writes, "God is God, and distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above 'em, chiefly by his divine beauty, which is infinitely diverse from all other beauty."²¹ The degree of beauty that the church offers the world correlates with the degree of beauty of God that the church envisions. To state this in the negative, the degree to which a church does not rightly perceive God's beauty is the degree to which its life and mission will be repulsive. The mission of God, *missio Dei*, is first about the God who sends out of God's overflowing love, not just the fact that God sends. If we overlook the way of God's sending, then we run the risk of projecting forms of false, penultimate beauties onto God's sending nature, thereby clouding the perception of God's ultimate beauty.

Sent Beauty

Being beautiful and being missional are directly related in the Scriptures. Although the specific word commonly translated as "beauty" or "beautiful" is rarely used in the original biblical languages, thematic synonyms like splendor, glory, and wonder are woven throughout.²² In addition, the biblical authors employ the tools of beauty to convey God's truth and goodness, including compelling metaphors, poetry, images,

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, His Works (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 298.

²² For an introductory survey on the language of "glory of God" in the Scriptures, see "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," 512-25. The question of beauty in the Scripture is a topic worthy of greater exploration, especially related to the question of the beauty of the church.

narratives, and personal communication.²³ One significant passage that both uses the vocabulary of beauty along with the medium of poetry happens to be one of the most prominent passages regarding what it means to be “sent” (missional):

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:14-15).²⁴

While this passage has been primarily applied to evangelizing individual non-Christians, in the larger context of Paul’s letter and within the specific context of life in the first-century church, the pattern of sending, to preaching, to hearing, to believing, to “calling on the name of the Lord” is rooted in the sent (*ἀποσταλῶσιν*) ontology of the church in the midst of the world. Those who are sent are beautiful because they carry with them the announcement of “good news.” The word for “bring good news,” *εὐαγγελιζόμενον*, refers to an imaginative word picture of a herald who was sent by a king after a victorious battle to announce to his subjects that he is returning in victory. The “sent” herald’s announcement of the good news itself contributes nothing to the actual victory. It is an excessive, unnecessary, and gratuitous message offered to those who had nothing to do with the actual battle itself. It is an announcement that the king who is away at war has defeated his enemy and that he is returning to restore the peace that has been won.²⁵ This message is not necessary to the outcome of the battle. Instead,

²³ These include: the vision of Isaiah in Isaiah 6, Ezekiel’s visions, the Suffering Servant poetry, the parables of Luke 15, the creative use of letters by Paul, the imagery of Revelation, and the sermonic rhetoric of Hebrews.

²⁴ Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, Copyright ©1973, 1984, 2011 Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

²⁵ N. T. Wright provides background to this as he explains the way the announcement of good news in a political context by a herald was a three-fold proclamation: 1) something has happened, 2)

it is merely the overflowing, free announcement that the enemy has been defeated, and therefore circumstances have changed. Such a message is inherently beautiful, being evocative, and ultimately glorious.

The “good news” that those who are “sent” announce is rooted in the nature of who God is. As complete in his own beauty and glory, the *imago Dei* is endless delight as Father-Son-Spirit. He is complete and all-encompassing beauty as the fullness of love.

Hart writes,

True beauty is not the idea of the beautiful, a static archetype in the ‘mind’ of God, but is an infinite ‘music,’ drama, art, completed in—but never ‘bounded’ by—termless dynamism of the Trinity’s life; God is boundless, and so is never a boundary; his music possesses the richness of every transition, interval, measure, variation—all dancing and delight.²⁶

To say that God is a missionary God who is a “fountain of sending love” in the light of God’s beauty is to say that God is inherently excessive, as his message extends out to those who have nothing to do with the victory he has accomplished. God does not need to give away God’s being in order to be what God is, because as Father-Son-Spirit, God is eternally loving. However, because that love is endlessly overflowing, God creates out of overflowing love and continues to be on mission to give away that love. The act of God (*missio Dei*) is based in who God is as being complete already in who God is (*imago Dei*). That which extends forth in his work of creation and in the work of mission is excessive overflow and therefore unlimited. This is the nature of beauty, as it

something therefore will happen, and 3) the way things are right now is different as a result. N. T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is New and What Makes It Good* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 9-13.

²⁶ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 177.

is “more than necessary.” In God’s completeness of beauty, he emanates with beauty which flows out like a river.²⁷ We might illustrate it this way.

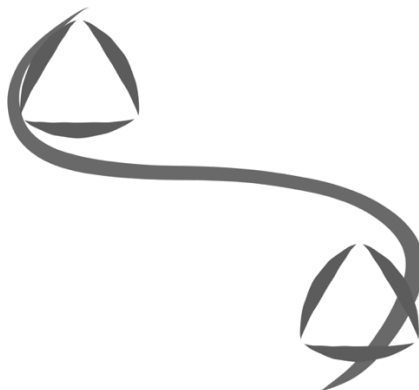


Figure 16: More than Necessary

The river flows out of God’s eternal being to others in order to include others in God’s life. The triune God as the *imago Dei* extends forth in excessive love, sending Godself out to the other. Gregory Boyd speaks of God’s beauty in this way:

[T]he fact that God creates a non-divine reality, that God acts as God acts, loves as God loves, and saves as God saves, is beyond all metaphysical necessity. . . . The non-divine world, and God’s radical involvement in it, is thus at once rational and ‘more than rational.’ It is not capricious, but it is gracious.²⁸

God is an “inexhaustible abundance of life,” who by nature has the “divine disposition for social delight” and “is thus said to ‘overflow,’ ‘emanate,’ or ‘diffuse itself outside the Trinity.’”²⁹ The uncontainable “intensity of love and delight of God *ad intra*

²⁷ The use of the word “emanate” is not to be confused with the Neo-Platonic use of the word, which designates a cosmology which flows forth from “the one” at the top of the hierarchy of being down through stages of lesser beings and down to the lowest realm of the world. The emanation of Triune love is not disseminated through a hierarchy of forms; instead the Triune God radiates the being of the Father-Son-Spirit as a free gift of creation. See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online, s.v. “Neoplatonism,” by Christian Wildberg, accessed August 17, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoplatonism>.

²⁸ Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics*, 392.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

bursts forth into a ‘repetition’ or reduplication of this love and delight *ad extra*.³⁰ It is not too much to say that God’s being overflows to such a degree that it spills out in ecstatic, exocentric mission for the sake of the other. God is on mission out of the overflow of his life of love between the Father-Son-Spirit. Boyd continues,

God’s essential being is an eternal event—the event of the perfect eternal exercising of God’s disposition to be God; the eternal event of God relating to Godself with unsurpassable beauty and love; the event of God eternally becoming triune and celebrating this triunity. . . . [T]his actual life [of God] is unsurpassable in the intensity of its love and beauty.³¹

God could not be more loving or more beautiful than God is in his being. “God can thus be defined, most fundamentally, as the unsurpassable intense event of beauty.”³² Hart describes the beauty of God this way, “God’s beauty is delight and the object of delight, the shared gaze of love that belongs to the persons of the Trinity.”³³ God in his being (*imago Dei*) spills forth in joy (*missio Dei*) because he lives in eternal delight of love in the triune dance. God rejoices over his creation not because he needs the other in order to be complete, nor to increase his joy because he is already endless love, endless delight as Father-Son-Spirit. He simply lives in joy with his creation because God’s life is that movement of endless joy.

The Non-Divided Beauty

One could conclude that this view of God as being inherently beautiful and complete in and of Godself apart from creation means that God’s being as Father-Son-

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 391.

³² Ibid., 394.

³³ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 177.

Spirit is first an interior movement and then *missio Dei* is a second movement that is exterior to God. The inner communion of God, in this view, takes priority and is set against the secondary exterior movement of mission. While it is true that God is fully beautiful in God's being and therefore God does not need the other of creation in order to become God,³⁴ we must not go so far as to say that God's fullness of glory and beauty is divided from the economy of salvation and mission in the world. If this is the case, then the revelation of Jesus is not intrinsic to God's being. It is because God is ultimately beautiful that God can turn toward creation and give Godself away in mission. Mission, in other words, is a manifestation of his character as one who is inundant beauty. The flooding movement of beauty out into the world is not secondary, but instead, by definition, it is a natural profusion of who God is. The perception of the divine cannot be called beautiful unless it is turned outward because beauty witnesses to itself; it shines forth its nature because it cannot help but shine. There is no such thing as an inward movement versus an outward movement in God's life because the movement of God's beauty cannot be contained. The inward life of the Father-Son-Spirit is defined by the turning toward each other. Because of this, paradoxically, the inner life is manifest outward in mission toward the other. While this might seem like an esoteric theory about the Trinity, actually its implications are crucial to the conversation regarding the aesthetics of mission, a topic that will be addressed in chapter seven.

The Performance of *Missio Dei*

The aesthetic confession that *God is triune and therefore over-flowing beauty that emanates out from the being of God* requires revelation through the Performance of

³⁴ This stands in contrast to a process view of God.

God's beauty by God. If God's beauty is that which excessively spills out as a free, playful gift to the point of being "more than necessary," we must make space for God to express the way of this gift, for without God's unveiling the nature of beauty, humanity is left to itself to project versions of beauty upon God that are actually foreign to God's being. Balthasar writes, "[T]he Father's act of self-giving, with which he pours out his Son through all space and time of creation, is the definitive opening of the very trinitarian act in which the 'persons' of God, 'relations,' forms of absolute self-donation and loving flow."³⁵ We must examine the revelation of the beauty that God performs in space and time. The beauty that God is and therefore the beauty that defines *missio Dei* cannot be known *a priori*. That the triune God emanates life ontologically corresponds with the missional nature of God. However, the divine effulgence of beauty that flows forth eternally on mission from God's nature cannot be defined without actually perceiving the effulgence of that beauty. Beauty must reveal its own nature. *Missio Dei* must unveil the nature of its own *missio Dei*. The testimony that Jesus offers of himself is instructive: "λέγει αὐτοῦ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ· οὐδεὶς ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸν πατέρα εἰ μὴ δι' ἐμοῦ" (John 14:6).³⁶

This is one of the "I am" statements of Jesus found in the book of John which echoes the announcement of the name of YHWH to Moses at the burning bush. Here Jesus is named according to his being, which he equates to the revelation of the identity of the Father. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9), Jesus proclaims in this same pericope. The image of Jesus is named and thereby we are able to perceive the

³⁵ Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, 146.

³⁶ Jesus said to them, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

image of God (*imago Dei*). First, Jesus tells us that the being of Jesus is *ἡ ἀλήθεια* (the truth), which speaks to how Jesus has unveiled or uncovered that which had been previously hidden. Jesus is *ἡ ὁδός* (the “way” of goodness), which speaks to a way of practicing the good that shapes us in the ways of God. Jesus is *ἡ ζωή* (the “life” of beauty), the form of life that speaks to the experience that aligns with creation.

Jesus performs the truth, goodness, and beauty of God. While Moses was not allowed to see the glory of YHWH in his encounter at the burning bush, in Christ, we have the opportunity to see—that is perceive and therefore know the reality of—the image of God. God is no longer hidden from sight. The idea of God does not exist somewhere behind the revelation of Christ. John writes in John 14:7 “*εἰ ἐγνώκειτέ με, καὶ τὸν πατέρα μου ἂν ᾗδειτε· ἀπ’ ἄρτι γινώσκετε αὐτὸν καὶ ἐώρακατε αὐτόν.*”³⁷ About this verse, Edwards comments,

Seeing the perfect idea of a thing is to all intents and purposes the same as seeing the thing; it is not only equivalent to seeing of it, but it is seeing of it, for there is no other seeing but having an idea. Now by seeing a perfect idea, so far as we see it we have it; but it can’t be said of anything else that in seeing of it we see another, strictly speaking, except it be the very idea of the other.³⁸

³⁷ “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

³⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The "Miscellanies": Entry Nos. A-Z, Aa-Zz, 1-500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 368. Although I use this quote by Edwards to speak to the perception of one’s “idea” or imagination that one has about God, when it comes to understanding the nature of the Trinity, I take a different approach. Edwards worked primarily from a speculative view of the imminent God that is based on anthropological analogies. On this see *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). The following aligns with the argument initiated by Karl Barth that the Trinity is to be understood according to the economy of revelation. This argument extends far beyond the bounds of this thesis, however, since Edwards’ view of emanation and remanation are essential to what is being offered here, clarifying the differences is important. This is especially the case since Edwards’ *a priori* approach to defining the nature of the imminent Trinity has been so pervasive. On this distinction see Ross Hastings, *Jonathan Edwards and the Life of God: Toward an Evangelical Theology of Participation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 72-87.

We are not left to our own imaginations regarding the form of God's truth, goodness, or beauty, as if our knowledge of the Father-Son-Spirit can be constructed through idealistic speculation based on anthropological speculations. Our knowledge of God and therefore our ability to participate in God and in God's mission depends upon the revelation of God in Christ.³⁹

We know that God is triune in his eternal nature because this is what Christ revealed. While there is far more than we can know about the *imago Dei* or the "idea" of triune God (using Edwards' use of "idea"), Jesus reveals that whatever else there is to know about God *ad intra* aligns with that which we can see in the truth, goodness, and beauty made evident the revelation of God *ad extra*. While the Father and the Spirit are not the same as the Son, there is no idea of God that is different in character from that which is revealed in Christ.

Derivatively, the sending of God in Christ *ad extra* must define the sending of the church. We can only see what the ontology (the naming) of mission means in the light of perceiving the ontology (the naming) of the one who was sent to reveal the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of God. We might even imagine Jesus talking about mission in this way, "If you see how I am on mission, you see the way that God sends the church."

³⁹ To further clarify the departure from Jonathan Edwards taken in this project, for Edwards, the image of glory, that is the "idea of the thing" that is seen is defined by "the view or knowledge of God's excellency. . . . The word 'glory' very often in Scripture signifies or implies honor, as anyone may soon see by casting his eye on a concordance. But honor implies the knowledge of the dignity and excellency of him who hath the honor," Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," 521-22. The difference, as will be made clear in what follows, is that Edwards defines the glory of God in a way that gives equal weight to the various passages that refer to God's glory, which requires an *a priori* reading of glory. The revelation of God in Christ on the cross serves as a climactic or ultimate expression through which all other discussions of the glory of God must be read. In other words, the glory of God is only understood *a posteriori* on the other side of the cross.

The Revelation of the Cross

God provides an aesthetic vision of Godself, which is ultimately exhibited when Jesus is lifted up on the cross. The First Epistle of John announces, “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and then proceeds to define this love by stating, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). The cross then is the portal through which we can imagine the beauty of God *ad intra*, and it is the way that God works in the world *ad extra*. To continue the image that has been developed thus far, the cross lies at the center of God’s revelation. The *crucis Dei* is the *imago Dei*.

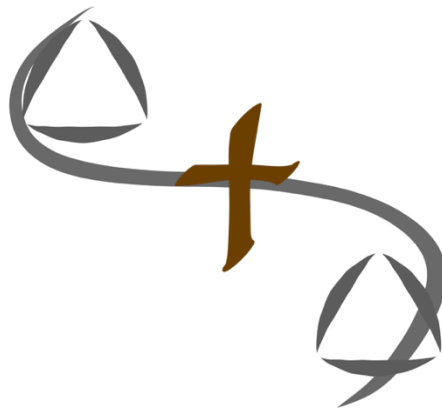


Figure 17: Crucis Dei

The mission of God and the church’s participation in that mission hinges on seeing the cross as the beauty of God. Balthasar summarizes his first volume on theological aesthetics by stating,

[E]verything of beauty found in the world (and with it too the true and the good) is drawn up into a relationship to this inexhaustible standard, where the living God of love is glorified as he pours out his limitless love for the creature kenotically into the void which is empty of himself, indeed into what is strictly totally other than himself: into the abyss of guilty, godless darkness and godforsakenness. Thus, going to the utmost point of what is not God, he can finally establish his lordship and his glory in what is other than himself, in man, and by the glorified Kyrios fashion glory out of humanity and the cosmos, which

Christ in his final prayer (Jn 17) declares to have been accomplished, at the same time as he still requires it to be accomplished.⁴⁰

The “inexhaustible standard” for beauty is found in the strange glory of the crucified God. The ultimate beauty of Jesus expressed on the cross is the ultimate expression of God’s overflowing love. Bonhoeffer claimed, “The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.”⁴¹ Moltmann writes, “In Christianity the cross is the test of everything which deserved to be called Christian.”⁴² This “everything” includes God’s mission, which is founded upon and defined by the inexhaustible standard of excessively unnecessary love of the cross. Without the cross, there is no Christianity and thus there is no mission. Just as “Christian theology must be theology of the cross, if it is to be identified as Christian theology through Christ,”⁴³ so must a Christian view of the missional church be a mission of the cross. Moltmann continues:

Humiliation to the point of death corresponds to God’s nature in the contradiction of the abandonment. When the crucified Jesus is called the ‘image of the invisible God,’ the meaning is that Christ is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humility.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics 2: Clerical Styles*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 11-12.

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Isabel Best, et al., 1st English ed., Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 479.

⁴² Moltmann, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

The way that God is on mission is based in and cannot go beyond or around the ultimate revelation of God on the cross. The power of God revealed in the humiliation and the self-surrender demonstrates the way that God is at work in the world.

The Cross and the Beauty of Peace

It should be obvious that the way of the cross is the way of peace, revealing that God's *missio Dei* is a way of non-violence. However, the call to non-violence is not a topic that is often explored in missional church literature. Of course, there are those from within the Anabaptist tradition who write of this relationship, but it is too easy to sequester their perspective as merely a part of their tradition and not something that is intrinsic to the *missio Dei*.⁴⁵ However, if the cross is the ultimate revelation of who God is and how God works in the world, then non-violence is not extrinsic to *missio Dei*.⁴⁶ If the cross is the definitive revelation of God, then non-violence is inherent to God's being, which means that non-violence is inherent to *missio Dei*. The New Testament scholar Michael Gorman writes extensively of the relationship between peace and mission. "For Paul this gift of peace and reconciliation is not an addendum to something else, such as salvation, it is the mission of God, the *missio Dei*."⁴⁷ The way that God confronts and

⁴⁵ Stanley Walter Green, ed. *Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Voice* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015); Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005); Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004); *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004).

⁴⁶ Hauerwas writes, "The cross, the epitome of human cruelty and ugliness, is quite literally the manifestation of God's beauty—a beauty that we cannot possess but only suffer. By suffering such a beauty, a beauty that hides not its suffering, we are possessed and thus saved from the ugliness of our sin. In short we are made holy, Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 164. "The peaceableness of the Christian witness is rooted in the manner in which Jesus accepts his cross . . ." (92).

⁴⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 153.

wages war against the violence of the world, thereby saving it, is through the beauty of non-violence. Perceiving *missio Dei* as being non-violent is crucial to understanding the ontology of the *telos* of the missional church as well as the work of missional leadership.⁴⁸

The Surface/Visible Perception of the Cross

To perceive the beauty of the cross first requires that one see what it is on the surface: the visible expression of ultimate violence and repulsiveness. On the surface of the historical narrative, we see a criminal condemned to death, “despised and rejected . . . like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.” In fact, describing the surface revelation of Jesus, the Suffering Servant poetry states that he “had no beauty of majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). The outward semblance of the cross was the ultimate expression of the grotesque, hideous, and horrid, as it is the supreme expression of what God is not. As Balthasar stated in the quote above, Jesus entered into that which is “strictly totally other than himself: into the abyss of guilty, godless darkness and godforsakenness.” He did not take on human flesh at the top rung of society to reveal God and God’s kingdom. He did not even “become flesh” somewhere in the respected middle. Instead, he took on the “form of a slave” (Phil 2:7). He was born a child of scandal, raised as the son of a tradesman who did not own land, was forced to flee to Egypt because the political powers wanted to kill him, and had no formal education or position. While 2000 years of Christmas stories have turned these historical facts into

⁴⁸ This point deserves much more theological grounding; however, the point being made here is that the non-violent God defines the non-violent church (which will be explored in chapter seven) and therefore establishes non-violent patterns of leadership (which will be introduced in chapter eight).

virtues, they were nothing of the kind when they transpired. The surface characteristics of his life offered nothing beautiful to the world.

All of this put him on a path that led him to the cross where “he became sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21), becoming what he is not in order to reveal the extent to which his love extends to others who are not of him. The cross reveals the distance to which the beauty shared by Father-Son-Spirit flows out to others.⁴⁹ Boyd argues:

God could not have possibly gone to a further extreme, could not have possibly stooped further, and could not have possibly sacrificed more, than God did on the cross. And it is the unsurpassable extremity to which God condescended for our undeserving race that reveals the unsurpassable perfection of the love that God eternally is, and therefore the love that God has for us. . . . To borrow a turn of phrase from Anselm’s ontological argument, we might say that the cross is that revelation beyond which none greater can be conceived.⁵⁰

As such, Paul describes the common way of viewing the message of the cross as a “scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). With this claim, Gordon Fee observes that Paul “is asserting that a crucified Messiah, folly and weakness from a merely human point of view, is in fact God’s power and God’s wisdom in the world, despite all appearances to the contrary.”⁵¹ The way of God’s beauty turns the common ways of beauty on its head. If we only see the veneer, we fail to perceive the reality of who God is. This point is crucial in a world dominated by the clamor for entertainment because the cross will never entertain. However, it does evoke, as it draws

⁴⁹ John Webster comments about Balthasar’s view on this matter: “And the divine life does not at this point [the crucifixion] break down; the distance between Father and Son at the cross is not a distance in which God is in opposition to himself. Rather, it is the manifestation of the mutuality of God’s being, for here, too, there is played out ‘the commitment of the divine persons to each other’ so that ‘the mystery of the cross is the highest revelation of the Trinity,’” John Webster, “Hans Urs Von Balthasar: The Paschal Mystery,” *Evangel* 1/4 (October 1983): 7.

⁵⁰ Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, 192.

⁵¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 104.

those who can see it for what it is into something compelling and fulfilling that goes far beyond the perpetual grasping for the scintillating. Again, I draw from Boyd to expound on this:

The cross reveals a God of unfathomable humility and mercy who is not above stooping to appear far less beautiful than he actually is to appear as a guilty, crucified criminal!—in order to save us and to continue to achieve his sovereign purposes through his covenant people. It thus reveals a God who out of love is willing to condescend to appear in ways that reflect more of the sin of his people than they reflect the way he actually is, thereby disclosing his sin-bearing character.⁵²

The cross is the ultimate expression that God's ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). The beauty that God is cannot be developed from *a priori* definitions of beauty. God defines God's glory according to the distance he is willing to go for the sake of the other. We only see the distance, and therefore the evocative beauty of the cross, when we see the surface of the cross for what it is—the supreme expression of the hideous and repulsive. Any first century reader of the Gospels and the Epistles would have been struck by this obvious reality because the cross was a metaphorical symbol that communicated that the person hanging on the cross was a participant in the worst of the worst of society. However, when we peer through this reality, we can catch a glimpse of the beauty of God's power and God's wisdom.

Perceiving the Invisible in the Visible of the Cross

Bonhoeffer claims that "[T]he cross becomes the center and the paradoxical emblem of the Christian message. A king who dies on the cross must be the king of a rather strange kingdom. Only those who understand the profound paradox of the cross

⁵² Gregory A. Boyd, "Unpublished Draft of the Cruciform Center," (Unpublished manuscript, 2017), Microsoft Word file.

can also understand the whole meaning of Jesus's assertion: my kingdom is not from this world."⁵³ The beauty of the cross lies beneath the surface, and this relates to the imagination that one has when they come to the cross. While the cross might appear to express one thing, if one has eyes to see and ears to hear—that is aesthetic perception—there appears something else. Boyd proposes:

[I]nsofar as we discern God's revelatory and salvific action toward us on the cross, the Crucifixion is beautiful, for the unsurpassable depth to which God was willing to stoop—even to the point of becoming our sin and our curse—reveals the unsurpassable perfection of the love that God eternally is. By contrast, insofar as we discern God humbly stooping to allow other agents to act upon him, the Crucifixion is grotesquely ugly, for it reflects not only the sinful violence that his executioners inflicted upon him; it mirrors the grotesque ugliness of the sin and judgment of the world that Christ bore.⁵⁴

Seeing the beauty of the cross depends upon one's capacity to see beneath the appearances, for here is the portal through which we see the eternal beauty of God. As we look through the cross, the true beauty of the eternal love of the Father-Son-Spirit comes into focus. The distance traveled by God on the cross reflects the distance-traveling love that the Father-Son-Spirit have shared from all time.⁵⁵ God is self-giving to the other on the cross because God has always lived in this self-giving. The cross is not then foreign to God's nature, nor was Jesus "doing something foreign to himself;"⁵⁶ it is the

⁵³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity," in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928/1931, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol 10*, ed. Reinhart and Hans Christoph von Hase Staats (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 357.

⁵⁴ Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, 2:1250.

⁵⁵ Adrienne von Speyr stated, "The relationship of the divine persons to one another is so wide that it has room for the whole world," quoted in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution of Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 60.

⁵⁶ Boyd, "Unpublished Draft of the Cruciform Center," (unpublished manuscript, December 2016), Microsoft Word file.

manifestation of the depth of God's ecstatic, endlessly self-giving character. Balthasar claims something similar when he states,

[I]f it is true that one in God took suffering upon himself to the point of abandonment by God and acknowledged it as his own, then obviously it is not as something alien to God that does not touch him inwardly, but as something most profoundly appropriate to his divine person, to the extent that his *missio* by the Father is a modality of this procession from the Father.⁵⁷

In a similar vein Boyd argues, "As paradoxical as it sounds, when God the Son stooped to the infinite extreme of experiencing God-forsakenness on the cross, he was manifesting outwardly in time the perfect unity he eternally enjoys with the Father."⁵⁸ The extreme love expressed on the cross is a witness to the extreme love that the Father-Son-Spirit have shared for all eternity.

In his book *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, Greg Boyd works out how this view of God can lead to an interpretation of the grotesque portraits of God in the Old Testament so that they not only are reconciled to the revelation of the non-violent God in Christ, but also they actually point to the divine Performance of the cross. He calls this the Cruciform Hermeneutic. In this revelation, we see two things. First God not only took the "initiative to act toward people" but also God allowed "people to act upon him, thereby conditioning his appearance."⁵⁹ The acting upon God by others resulted in Christ becoming our sin (2 Cor 5:21) and our curse (Gal 3:13). In other words, God did not reveal himself unilaterally. Instead, he unveiled the "radiance of God's glory" (Heb 1:3) in a dialectical way. "[I]nsofar as the cross reveals God acting up toward us, it is

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, 134.

⁵⁸ Boyd, "Unpublished Draft of the Cruciform Center."

⁵⁹ *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, 480-81.

beautiful, revealing that God was willing to go to the farthest possible extreme to redeem a race of undeserving rebels.” This is one pole of the dialectic. The second demonstrates that “insofar as the cross involved God allowing wicked agents and the sin of the world to act toward him, it is grotesque, manifesting the ugliness of sin.”⁶⁰

The second aspect of the Cruciform Hermeneutic addresses how one perceives the beauty of the cross. On the surface, viewed through a “worldly point of view” (2 Cor 5:16), Jesus is the lowest of the low. Only as one peers through the veneer of the repulsive cross can one see the beauty of the God who hangs on the cross. “What rather reveals God is what faith alone can see when it looks through this ugly surface to behold the beauty of the loving and humble Creator condescending to go to this infinite extreme out of love for a lost race.”⁶¹

The Cross and *Missio Dei*

This two-part understanding of the *crucis Dei*, one being the surface-level perception and the other being that which lies beneath the surface, provides a way to discern the way that God is on mission in the world. The Cruciform Hermeneutic that Boyd proposes reveals both the direct *missio Dei*, as it unveils “the unsurpassable depth to which God is willing to stoop” as well as the indirect *missio Dei* as it demonstrates the degree to which God allows “other agents to act toward him” which means that God takes on the “grotesque ugliness of sin and judgement of the world.”⁶² The direct mission corresponds with the surface-level or visible results of mission, while the indirect

⁶⁰ Ibid., 482.

⁶¹ Ibid., 496.

⁶² Ibid., 1250.

corresponds with that which lies beneath the surface or the “invisible in the visible” which is the introductory framework of beauty introduced in chapter three.

The direct *missio Dei* manifests in surface expressions of mission, as the self-sacrificial love is put on display in ways that are obvious, measurable, and concrete. On the surface, the Spirit works through the church with obvious manifestations of redemption and hope where the church offers beauty in direct ways that have been traditionally connected with the mission of God. The direct, surface-level mission can be illustrated by the five “marks” of mission described in *Mission in the 21st Century*.⁶³ They are 1) To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, 2) To Teach, Baptize, and Nurture New Believers, 3) To Respond to Human Need by Loving Service, 4) To seek to Transform unjust Structures in Society, and, 5) To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth.⁶⁴

⁶³ Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross, *Mission in the Twenty-First Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008). J. Andrew Kirk works out the surface demonstrations of mission as: announcing the gospel, the gospel in the midst of cultures, justice for the poor, encounter with religions of the world, overcoming violence and building peace, care of the environment, and sharing in partnership, J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000). Bevans and Schroeder identify six elements of mission; they include witness and proclamation; liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; interreligious/secular dialogue; inculturation; and reconciliation, Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 64-71. *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 348-95. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen identifies six of his own: mission as evangelism and common witness, mission as healing and restoration, mission as social justice and equality, mission as integrity and flourishing of nature, mission as reconciliation and peace building, and mission as dialogue and interfaith engagement, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 345. The point I am making here is not to identify a definitive list of the surface “marks” or “elements” of mission, but to illustrate that there are specific external, surface-level, direct results that are expected of mission in order to contrast that to the indirect or hidden life that actually produces that which can be measured directly.

⁶⁴ Another way to frame the surface manifestation of mission is the language of being, doing and telling, which aims at defining the mission of God in a holistic way. This view promotes a vision where the church manifests the mission through proclamation in the form of verbal witness, its actions in “doing good” in the world, and its way of life as it embodies God’s ways. Dean Flemming argues for this perspective in his book *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing, and Telling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013). This is helpful in two ways. First is acknowledges that the aims of God’s mission are not limited to the bi-polar categories of evangelism and church growth versus social engagement and justice. Words and actions are both important, and therefore this perspective

The indirect expressions of *missio Dei* revealed by the *crucis Dei*—the invisible in the visible—can only be discerned when one peers through the veneer of the surface “marks” of mission. In other words, *missio Dei* as the beauty of the cross is not merely what the church does to produce overt missional results; instead, the surface-level marks of mission are the product of the faith of a church that perceives what God is doing beneath the surface. This means that we must peer through the veneer, whether the surface looks like the marks of mission or is even antithetical to it. This makes space for seeing how God is at work in the inherently repulsive, in both the world and in the church. Beauty, as shaped by the cross, is not merely what is offered to the world, where one group (the church) supposedly possesses a form of God’s beauty to redeem an ugly world. God’s beauty is paradoxically discovered as we peer through the veneer of the repulsive and discover the *missio Dei*, by faith, in what does not look like God.

Boyd applies this Cruciform Hermeneutic to interpret the ugly portraits of God found in the Old Testament, thereby developing four principles that comprise what he calls the Cruciform Thesis. These principles explain what is going on when one looks

moves the conversation beyond categories of mission promoted by those from a traditional Evangelical camp and traditional mainline and Catholic perspectives. Even more though, this frame emphasizes the call of mission as a way of being. As Van Gelder and Zscheile write, “Being the church involves practicing a way of life as a community that shows forth an alternative narrative and an alternative future to the dominant cultural narratives. The church embodies something by nature of who it is, which is expressed in how it practices its life together. Its life is anchored in God’s ongoing reconciliation of the world in Christ.” Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God’s Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*, 285. The surface manifestation of *missio Dei* is viewed in the way that the church speaks, the way that a church acts and the way that a church is. One could argue that the five marks of mission as named by Walls and Ross primarily operate from within the imagination of mission as doing and speaking. This shift to being, doing and telling as promoted by Flemming guides us to move the missional conversation into the imagination of the ontology of the church. However, his language only focuses on the external characteristics of being, doing and telling. He does not speak to that which is going on beneath the surface which actually makes the being, doing, and telling of *missio Dei* a reality. As a result, this holistic mission, while rightly focused, becomes that which the church must produce and therefore a result of human agency.

beneath the surface of the ugly portraits to understand, by faith, how God's beauty is actually revealed, perceiving "the invisible in the visible." The four principles are rooted in theological aesthetics and inform our understanding of the intersection of theological aesthetics and missional church. The *crucis Dei* as the *imago Dei* informs the *missio Dei* in ways that are related to Boyd's four principles. The following is a brief summary:

The Principle of Cruciform Accommodation—In God's condescending to die on the cross, God demonstrated his willingness to accommodate the grotesque to the point of becoming sin and thereby taking on an image that is antithetical to the essence of God's nature. This accommodation is not based on an *a priori* philosophical ideal of an ultimate being that lies behind the revelation of God on the cross. Any conception of God in the Bible that does not align with the revelation of the cross must be considered an accommodation of a stooping God.

The Principle of Redemptive Withdrawal—This principle explicates how God demonstrated divine wrath on the cross. Instead of viewing God's wrath as angry violence toward Jesus or toward those coming under divine judgment, it is actually an act of withdrawal of the Father's protective presence. In this way, what is called "wrath" is punishment for sin that is actually intrinsic to sin. God's nonviolent response to sin allows for sin to bring about its own consequences.

The Principle of Cosmic Conflict—The cross is the locus of God's victory over sin, the devil, and the powers of evil. We must, therefore, understand God's work in the world as a war against the agents of darkness that stands against the kingdom of God.

The Principle of Semiautonomous Power—The cross reveals that when God empowers an other, God releases that power to the control of that other as the other has influence upon how the God-endued authority is employed.

These four principles speak to the way that God performs the revelation of the cross. By peering beneath the surface appearance of the repulsive cross that only points to a crucified criminal, we can see the way that God performs the eternal beauty that he is. Understanding the way that Christ performed the love of God in the cross will inform the *imago Dei* that shapes what it means to participate in the way that *missio Dei* is performed today. The following applies this Performance of the cross to *missio Dei*.

Cruciform Accommodation and Being With

The cross demonstrates not only how God acts toward the other, but also how God allows others to act toward and influence him. The “other” is a reference to the being who is distinct, unique, and particular from self. I am using the language of “other” instead of “the world” in order to speak to the various kinds of others that exist. Humanity is other to God, and God is the eternal “Other” from our limited point of view. However, to speak of “other” also refers to the others of creation, animals, and every human being.⁶⁵ From God’s perspective, the other is what he created out of the freedom of his “more than necessary” beauty. The fact that “others” exist in contrast to the Other is an expression of God’s unlimited beauty. The question we face as the church seeking to understanding *missio Dei* in the light of the beauty revealed via *crucis Dei* is How does the cross perform the relationship of other to other?

⁶⁵ Jean Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 39.

The cross reveals a God who comes to be *with* the other, making room for the other to freely influence his actions. God is near, *Immanuel*. The beauty of the cross is that Christ entered into the depths of the depravity of humanity, the lowest point of all lows to be in relationship with all. Ethicist and Anglican priest Samuel Wells states, “For Jesus, our real problem as human beings is our alienation from God and one another.”⁶⁶ God came and God died because God is relationship. There is no depth to which God has not gone to be with the worst of the worst in order to draw up the other into life with Godself. Because God has demonstrated that his love extends to the greatest possible distance, he reveals that there is no place that God is not with us and this informs the way that the church participates in God’s mission. In the concluding sentence by Jesus at the end of Matthew, we read “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Even though Jesus was about to ascend, he said that he would never leave us, a promise that is directly connected to the Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations.” In addition, in the only recorded discussion of Jesus about the church, Jesus stated, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also” (Matt 18:20). The presence of God with us is the driving force of the church.

God is dialogical and reciprocal, as God opens Godself up to being influenced by that which is other. Boyd states, “On the cross, God reveals his self-sacrificial loving character not only by acting toward us, but also by allowing others to impact him.”⁶⁷ God is the kind of God who not only emanates love toward others but also the one whose

⁶⁶ Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 78.

⁶⁷ Gregory A. Boyd, *Shadow of the Cross*, podcast audio 2012, <http://whchurch.org/sermons-media/sermon/shadow-of-the-cross>.

beautiful character opens to others, to the point of being acted upon. He allows himself to be vulnerable, to the point of submitting himself as a slave (Phil 2:5-8) and being overpowered by the other. This act of God on the cross reveals the being of God who over-abounds with so much love and beauty that he will accommodate himself to the point that even those who have rebelled against him impact how he carries out the *missio Dei*.

To understand what it means to be with the other, it is crucial to see it in the light of the contrast of being for the other. Being present *for* the other corresponds with a monological paradigm of God's work in the world, where the Father sends the Son and the Father and Son send the Spirit who sends forth the church on mission. As a result, the church must possess something within its life that the world (the other) needs. The church then works (in mission) *for* the world as the church seeks to fix the "other," because the "other" lacks what it has. As a result, the church is functional and treats others as objects as opposed to subjects because mission is about the church organizing its activities around intention, purpose, and direction.⁶⁸

The presence of the church in the world and its corresponding mission is viewed as going out to the other so that the other can no longer be an other; instead the other can become like the self. It is commonly assumed that the church is *for* the world in mission so that the world can become like the church.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Illustrated by Will Mancini, *Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

⁶⁹ The famous statement of Bonhoeffer "The church is church only when it is there for others," as he uses the preposition "for" to convey that the church is not set apart from the world, and therefore it has often been quoted out of the context of Bonhoeffer's larger meaning. He continues in the same paragraph, "The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community—not dominating but helping and serving. . . . It will have to speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, and contentment." These are words that define the posture of being for others

This mirrors the imagination commonly held about God. God is *for* us in that God is the Other who is up there or over there and the church comes before God to get something that it needs in order to do what the Other has called it to do. God is *for* the church so that the church can be *for* the world.

This presence of being *for* is a subtle form of consumeristic spirituality. There is a transaction between the church and the Other so that there can be an effective missional transaction of the church *for* the other of the world. Within this perspective, the cross becomes a way to consume the benefits of salvation so that one might have a better life and mission is viewed a way to dispense this better life to the world. God gives the gospel as a “spiritual good and service” to extend to the world, and therefore the church takes it upon itself to work *for* the world in the same way that it has experienced God working *for* them. To put it another way, mission is a supply chain that is sourced in the Father through the manufacturing of the Son, and the delivering of the Spirit. Now it is up to the church to market and sell the spiritual product.

God performed the *crucis Dei* by being with through the dialectic of acting and being acted upon. Wells writes, “God’s fundamental purpose to be with us—not primarily to rescue us, or even to empower us, but simply to be with us, to share our existence, . . . Being with us is the nature of God—the grain of the universe.”⁷⁰ God works *for* us, but the *for* is a subset of being *with*. The church offers God *with* us to the world by being *with* God as we are *with* others. In the same way that the Father-Son-

as the church is “with” others. In other words, Bonhoeffer is challenging the church to participate in the realities of the world. Therefore, Bonhoeffer’s use of the word “for” is different from the use that I am critiquing here, Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 503.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Spirit witness to the beauty of God as they give out of their abounding love of being with each other, so the church is only able to witness to this beauty as they perform the life of God by being with others.

Cosmic Conflict and Priestly Prayer

The cross reveals a God who accomplishes the victory over sin and the devil by opening Godself up to the other and allowing the other to influence him. He takes on what he is not to reveal the extent of his eternal love. As opposed to a view of God that mandates his will and expects his followers to receive and act upon what he tells them to do, he invites others to fully engage him in the process of redeeming the world. The *missio Dei* is God's work; he invites others to enter into the dialogue of world transformation with him.

The people of God, therefore, are full contributors in the *missio Dei*. The church has "say-so."⁷¹ By being with the other in the context, God's people are invited to serve as priests, bringing what is discovered about the local context before God (1 Peter 2:9). The first job of the priest is to bring the needs before the Father, and only derivatively to bring the life of God to the context. In other words, the active, visible work of mission arises out of the passive, invisible work of intercession.

Mission then is not about the church doing certain things to make a difference in the world as a mere extension of being sent by the Father. Nor is it mimicking the life of Christ as if we are able to do what Christ did. It is ultimately about participating in the life of God who is at work in the world by the Spirit. Zizioulas summarizes it this way:

⁷¹ Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 95-98.

[E]cclesial being is bound to the very being of God. From the fact that a human being is a member of the Church, he becomes an “image of God,” he exists as God Himself exists, he takes on God’s “way of being.” This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man *accomplishes*. It is a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an event of *communion*, and this is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual*, but only as an *ecclesial* fact.⁷²

Therefore, the way of the cross for the missional church is not defined by a set of activities that the church avoids and another set that the church embraces in order to produce mission. It involves a way of being. The Pauline metaphor of being ambassadors illustrates this point (2 Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador has the job of observing what is going on in a foreign country and returning back to the one who has the power to say and do something in that foreign country. The ambassador himself does not have the power to actually do anything, because it is as “though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20b). He is merely a messenger “between” to worlds. The ambassador only has power to the extent that he or she is in constant contact with the one who possesses the power. He intercedes on behalf of the foreign country and he announces the message from his ruling power. His work goes in both directions, and thus the mission is a derived mission. The power is not necessarily that of having the ability to pull off the mission. The power of ambassadors derives from the weakness of coming before the ruling authority as ambassadors express their perspective on what they are observing. Thus, the ambassadors participate in the character, the being, of that ruling power in such a way that they influence the actions taken by that ruling power. God’s acts depend, in part, upon the contribution of the other. This is inherently beautiful because God is not dictating what he will do and forcing his will coersively upon the other. Instead he is

⁷² Jean Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 15.

inviting the other to join in his work, even to the point of taking on the ill effects that the other brings to the table.

A related topic that has not been treated thoroughly is the relationship between spiritual warfare and missional church life.⁷³ It is beyond the bounds of this project to address the varying views of the meaning of principalities and powers and the meaning of Paul when he stated, “I battle not against flesh and blood” (Eph 6:12).⁷⁴ However, the relationship between prayer and God’s cruciform beauty is directly related to spiritual warfare because prayer depends upon the recognition that there is more to participating in God’s mission than merely the physical work of mission. There is a mysterious relationship between the God we are calling upon to work and what is standing against that work.⁷⁵ Prayer and mission are integrally connected. Balthasar puts it this way:

Prayer, ecclesiastical and personal, comes before action. It is not primarily a source of psychological strength, an opportunity for “refueling” as it were. It is an act in perfect harmony with love, an act of worship and glorification in which the person loved attempts to make a complete and selfless answer, in order to show that he has understood the divine message. . . . [I]t is as ridiculous as it is pathetic, to see contemporary Christians ignoring the fact and thinking that they only encounter Christ in their neighbor, or worse still imagining that their only task is to work in the (technological) world. They soon cease to be able to draw any distinction between worldly responsibility and the Christian mission. No one who

⁷³ The thoroughgoing absence of the topic of spiritual warfare in missional church literature is no less lacking than the content of prayer as it relates to *missio Dei*. Lesslie Newbigin does write on principalities and powers, however his interpretation focuses merely on structural powers and does not engage the issue of the mystery of God warring on a level that is beyond that of the physical. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 198-210. Mission that acknowledges the mystery of triune God but discounts the mystery of personified demonic resistance to the work of this mysterious God seems to be based more on an Enlightenment worldview than one shaped by the Scriptures. Much more work is needed on this topic as it relates to the missional church.

⁷⁴ See James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

⁷⁵ My perspective is directly influenced by the work of Greg Boyd on this topic. See Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict*. His view espouses that “principalities and powers” refers to both structural evil as well as personified evil.

does not know God in contemplation can recognize him in action, not even when he sees God reflect in “the oppressed and humiliated.”⁷⁶

As we enter into being with others and we are praying, our eyes will be opened to war with the principalities and powers that are part of the reality of local contexts. For instance, sociological analysis of the real often shows how modern life is over-saturated, but this is not merely a social phenomenon.⁷⁷ It is part of the system of principalities and powers against which God wages wars. Therefore, the church is called into spiritual warfare to revolt against such patterns, which begins with intercession.

Redemptive Withdrawal and Nonviolent Action

The cross is such that God allowed the other to act upon God to such a degree that God’s actions are hidden. However, in this hidden withdrawal, God’s beauty is most manifest, if one has eyes to see and ears to hear.

It is not in the monological action that God’s activity is ultimately manifest but in the dialogical improvisation where the other acts upon God, and in doing so God acts to undermine all violence. God acts by allowing the other to act upon him. Greg Boyd uses the martial art of Aikido to illustrate this point. Instead of violently acting toward an opponent, “aikido is a martial arts technique that trains ‘warriors’ to engage in nonresistance combat, turning the force of the aggressors back on themselves in order to neutralize their opponent and hopefully to enlighten them regarding the evil in their heart

⁷⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 88-89.

⁷⁷ There are many such social realities, including racial injustice, sexism, successism, secularism, and nationalism. See Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Religion: Losing Your Religion for the Beauty of a Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

that fueled their aggression.”⁷⁸ On the cross, God allowed the other to act upon him in such a way that he was able to turn evil upon itself, thereby using evil to defeat evil.

Most of the time, *missio Dei* is associated with proactivity. One might assume that the church performs “being with” and then prays in order to get to this point of doing something to make the marks of mission happen. To do so turns the mission of God into monologue, which could be argued is a subtle form of violence and therefore is not reflective of the *imago Dei* revealed in the *crucis Dei*. George Steiner claims that this can even be viewed within Jewish literature:

It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech acts except that of monologue, which has generated our acts of reply, of questioning, and counter-creation. After the *Book of Job* and Euripides’ *Bacchae*, there had to be, if man was to bear his being, the means of dialogue with God, which are spelled out in our poetics, music, art.⁷⁹

Walter Brueggemann builds on this point when he states that “[T]he church is a venue for dialogue in the midst of a monologic culture . . .”⁸⁰ Monologue is a form of subtle violence which occurs when the church—often with good intentions—refuses to allow the other to respond. Because the church assumes that it has been given the “truth” it can easily fall to this temptation. Brueggemann writes, “Such a temptation imagines absolute certainty and sovereignty, and uncritically imagines that any one of us can speak with the voice and authority of the monologic God. There can be no doubt that such a

⁷⁸ *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, 768.

⁷⁹ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 225.

⁸⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *A Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 73.

shrill voice of certitude, in any area of life, is an act of idolatry that is characteristically tinged with ideology.”⁸¹

The point of this acting and being acted on through nonviolent action is not to develop a strategy to accomplish the marks of mission but to perform its life according to the performance of the God on the cross. The church, in the image of the God who acts through dialogue, is called to know God by participating in this same dialogue of acting and being acted upon, by entering into the mystery of conversation and seeing where the work of God through that conversation might lead. Newbigin writes,

[W]e are engaged in a two-ways exercise. We have a story to tell, a name to communicate. There are no substitutes for this story and this name. We have to name the name and tell the story. But we do not yet know all that it means to say that Jesus is Lord. . . . [M]ission is not a one-way promotion but a two-way encounter in which we learn more of what the gospel means. We are learning as we go. This is the only way we affirm that the gospel is not just “true for us” but true for all.⁸²

This means that the mission of God is accomplished through the weakness of allowing the other to speak, even to the point of attacking and demeaning that which the church knows is true. The church is not threatened by this conversation. Instead, it learns to perform its faith in such a way that being acted upon by the other becomes an opportunity to subvert the attacks. Rather than through direct retort with the goal of proving the other wrong—which is the method taken when the church operates in the transcendental of truth—the church responds by absorbing the contribution of the other. This makes room for “poetics, music, art,” as Steiner observed, for the purpose of

⁸¹ Ibid., 73-74.

⁸² Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 34-35.

generating creative responses that might open upon the imagination of the other to “perceive” the truth.

Performing nonviolent action is the norm of the church’s life, which calls for the people of God to actually embrace the way of peace represented by the cross.⁸³ Missional actions—whether it is in proclaiming the gospel, walking alongside under-resourced or marginalized groups, fighting injustice, praying for the sick, caring for creation, or any other myriad number of options—only reflect the *crucis Dei* when we are performers of a way of peace. In other words, the church can only witness to what it actually believes, thereby offering a constructive contribution to the dialogue with the other. It can only do this if it actually embodies distinctive patterns that serve as an alternative way of peace in a world of violence. We might even go so far as to say, “What difference does it make what effects or results the church produces if it is not performed according to the peace of the cross, because the results are not based on the witness of Christ?” Nonviolent action witnesses to the life of who Jesus is, the *imago Dei* as a sign of God’s aim and ends for the world.⁸⁴ This is not the church set in exclusion to the context, which is actually a form

⁸³ “Peace describes the pacifist’s hope, the goal in the light of which he acts, the character of his action, the ultimate divine certainty which lets his position make sense; it does not describe the external appearance or the observable results of his behavior.” Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, 53.

⁸⁴ A derivative point that is related to Nonviolent Action is the need to deconstruct the imagination that the purpose of the church is to play a role in the promotion of national identity. In the case of the United States, the larger stage of public power—as wielded by national politics, corporations, and other symbols of success—is the demarcation of divine blessing. Those who have influence within these domains supposedly control history, for better or worse. Much energy has been invested in the church to get Christians in places of power and influence so as to control history toward a Christian end. However, the advancement of America, the growth of an industry, or progress in social standing is the real goal. The church plays the role of advancing these larger agendas. Therefore, it is assumed that the advancement of the church and the progress of the United States not only are correlated, but that the mission of the church should invest in the mission of the nation-state in which it is set. Because this mindset is so pervasive, and because it subverts the beauty of the church and of God, this topic deserves additional attention in the light of *missio Dei*.

of violence to the other, but an alternative way of peace manifest in the dialogue with the other.

Semiautonomous Power and Gifted Co-creation

The fourth of Boyd's principles corresponds with the impartation of power to those whom God sends to manifest the *imago Dei*. God does not give the church a set of principles or commands with regard to the way the church is to perform the *missio Dei*. God gives forth his very self. Moses establishes the way that Israel was to perform their faith when he says: "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:15-16). Gordon Fee comments, "God's Presence with Israel is what distinguishes them, not the Law or other 'identity markers.'"⁸⁵

In turn, the biblical view of Presence entails a corresponding power. Those who receive the *praesentia* of God are called to participate in the *missio Dei* and they are given the power to do so. The *missio Dei* is such that it cannot be accomplished without the power of God via the presence of God. This is not merely a doctrinal creed that one confesses. It is an experience. And when one reads the biblical narrative, it is clear that the personal presence and power of God via experience is a driving force in the way that God works in the world. In commenting about Paul, Fee writes, "Paul would simply not have understood the presence of the Spirit that did not also include such evidence of the Spirit's working that he termed 'powers,' which we translate 'miracles.'"⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 7.

⁸⁶ *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 166.

We need not eschew experiences *a priori*, as if they are only valid if they can be proven within the frame of logic, thus excluding the domain of beauty.⁸⁷ As heirs of the Enlightenment, we assume that experience must be controlled by reason. Moltmann writes about our modern view of experience that excludes mystery: “Experience as it is secured by scientific method is now objectified to such a degree that it no longer has any historically contingent aspects.”⁸⁸ In other words, we run experiences through a battery of logical tests in order to assess whether or not they are true, but in doing so we turn the experience into something other than an experience because we are putting distance between the subject and the experience, which means that we are measuring the veracity of an analytical statement about the experience. Moltmann continues,

Experiences that are fortuitous, unique, unrepeatable, and for which there is no warranty are no longer perceived at all; they are filtered out. They are excluded from the technological reconstruction of the world, because they are bound to count as unreasonable. The abundant wealth of life and experience is stifled through the eternal return of the same thing in the mechanism of rational demonstrability.⁸⁹

The power of the Spirit is an experience that is often “fortuitous, unique, unrepeatable, and for which there is no warranty” because the Spirit, the Spirit’s power,

⁸⁷ Over the last century, there is little that has caused as much controversy as the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement around the world. To raise statements about the Holy Spirit immediately causes readers to jump in or to resist. Two brief comments are necessary within this perspective. First, the power of God corresponds with the peace of God raised in the previous section. Too much of the time the supposed work of the Spirit over the last century has been performed violently, that is through manipulation, judgment, and force. The power of the Holy Spirit aligns with the revelation of the cross or it is not a power that comes from God. Life in the Spirit is the continuation of life of Christ in us. That which does not look like the revelation of the cross is not of Christ, no matter how the Bible is quoted or how much the Holy Spirit is promoted. Second, being that the cross is viewed as a scandal and foolishness when viewed with the natural eye, should not we assume that the way that we are empowered to perform the cross would be equally scandalous and foolish? With this we need not jump to the conclusion that to embrace the Holy Spirit’s power means that all churches should reflect the patterns of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement.

⁸⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 29.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

and the Spirit's gifts are endlessly creative. While they align with the cross, the Spirit of *missio Dei* empowers the people of God to put on the creative display of beauty that cannot be captured and reproduced. The Spirit equips God's people to respond creatively, manifesting the cruciform love of God in ways that cannot be replicated.

This Spirit-empowered co-creation is not only relevant to the way that the church operates and innovates—something about which much has been written—it also pertains to the way that the people of God perform the mission in daily life. The power of God is not limited to the domain of church, as if the church has control over the way the Spirit wants to move. Lesslie Newbigin called the church to see the gospel as public truth and therefore it has bearing on every aspect of life. By “public truth” this is not merely a matter of absolute truth about the truthfulness of salvation.⁹⁰ Rather it is “public” because it is a universal truth that cannot be relegated to the private, inner world that has nothing to do with public life. The empowering of the Spirit equips individuals, families, and smaller groupings to embody the gospel at work, in the home, and in the neighborhood.

The Practice of *Missio Dei*

Those Christians who wish to focus on questions about the nature of Christian mission are faced with an outrageous demand: from the beginning they must give up the very two questions that led them to deal with missional questions in the first place: “How can my church be missional?” and “How can we do something missional?” When a missional question presents itself essentially as the question of my church being missional and making an impact for the gospel upon the world, the decision has already been made that the church as an organization of people and the world are the ultimate

⁹⁰ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*.

realities, that there is a direct relationship between the impact that the church can and should have upon the world. Such missional reflection has the end goal that the church be missional and that the world—by the church’s direct actions—be made good.

If it turns out, however, that these realities, the church and the world, are themselves embedded in a wholly other ultimate reality, namely, the reality of God as revealed on the cross, then the questions related to the church and mission take on a whole new aspect. Of ultimate importance, then is not that the church become missional, or that the world be changed because of the efforts of a local church, but that the reality of God shows itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality.

The comments above are adapted from the opening two paragraphs of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s manuscript entitled “Christ, Reality, and Good” that is now found in his posthumous book *Ethics*.⁹¹ He was challenging the questions of “How can I be good?” or “How can I do something good?” We need to do the same for the church because our pragmatic lenses cause us to ask “how” questions about what it means to be a missional church: How do we get lost people in our doors (Mission as Evangelistic Growth)? How do we contribute to the common good (Mission as Community Impact)? How do we mobilize a church movement (Missional as Restructuring for Movement)? How do we become a distinctive society (Missional as Theopolitics)? How do we become the church in a radical new context (Missional as Contextual Engagement)?

While these questions are not irrelevant, they have the penultimate *telos* in mind because they are not the ultimate questions related to the church and to mission. We need a lens that will help us ask the ultimate question of God’s *telos* because this speaks to

⁹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 47-48.

how the people of God develop the capacity to participate in this *telos*. When we begin with penultimate questions that are centered on how the church should operate, then we are defining the end by the norms of church and mission and as a result we seek to develop a capacity for those penultimate ends. Such questions assume that the church is the source and *telos* of mission, that all we need to acquire is the right method or the appropriate contextual communication strategy in order to offer transformation to the world.

Ultimate reality then is not in what the church can directly offer the world, which is based in questions of how? The ultimate reality of the church is founded upon the question of who? When we start with who, we see that reality is not found in the church, but in the midst of God's life, and as such, we must base the reality of God in the fact that God is the subject, the actor in God's reality. This is the point that the grand story of the Bible lays out. God creates. God loves. God redeems. God sends the Son. God breathes the Spirit. God will restore all things. God is the main character, the protagonist of the story line. This is ultimate reality and this must inform our understanding of church, mission, and the way that God forms the capacity for God's people to live out the *imago Dei* and thereby participate in *missio Dei*. In doing so, we identify what it means to grow in the *capax Dei* so that we become a people who truly embody the *missio Dei* revealed by the *crucis Dei*.⁹²

Lesslie Newbigin states that the church is "sign, instrument and foretaste of God's reign for [a specific] place."⁹³ In other words, the church's *capax Dei* that empowers it to

⁹² The concept of *capax Dei* has been derived from the Catholic Hispanic theologian García-Rivera, 76.

⁹³ Newbigin, "The Nature and Calling of the Church," 138.

live out its missional identity is formed by its *telos* that God has in mind for all of creation. The church now is to align with the beauty of God that is moving back from the end of time into the present, a beauty that has already been accomplished through the cross. This is informed by the already/not yet worldview of the New Testament writers. The *telos* of the world has already been accomplished through Christ and the work of the cross, but it has not yet been fully manifested. Now the church lives in a place in between the already and the not yet.⁹⁴

In this “between” place, the church often finds itself trying to develop the capacity for the *telos* that defines its mission through behaviorist processes, which aim at trying to make the church into that which it is supposed to be. This can be illustrated by the “try harder” solution often adopted by individuals who are seeking to become more like Christ. Greg Boyd writes that Christians who take this approach to discipleship “reflect the prevalent American-Christian belief that a person’s character can be made more Christlike, more fruitful, simply by trying harder.”⁹⁵ Individuals look for formulas and patterns that promise personal transformation so that they can implement the steps identified by those formulas and become what they are supposed to be. They might look at the lack of love in their life, identify specific actions that look loving, and then try to act their way into being more loving. Boyd writes, “A person can try hard to act loving and joyful when he or she is actually unloving and depressed, but a person cannot

⁹⁴ This eschatological worldview shaped the imagination of the New Testament writers. For this, see: Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

⁹⁵ Gregory A. Boyd, *Seeing Is Believing: Experience Jesus through Imaginative Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 22.

actually become loving and joyful simply by trying to be so! . . . We can try to act this way, but we cannot simply will ourselves to be this way.”⁹⁶

This same “try harder” solution is often adopted by churches that seek to participate in God’s mission. One might identify a list of characteristics of a missional church followed by a set of actions that will help a church develop those characteristics, and then it falls upon the church to commit themselves to acting in accordance with those plans. A church can try hard to act missional, following all of the right rules and plans that have been proven true in other settings, when the church is actually shaped by the capacity to be attractional. Being “attractional”—is an ontology of a church that stands in contrast to being missional. The church has developed the capacity to attract consumers by providing the best spiritual goods and services, thereby competing for the time and commitment of individuals within a specific context. The point is that one cannot change this attractional capacity by simply adopting a set of missional actions. This “try harder” approach to being missional often comes in the form of subtle manipulation done for “all the right reasons” and supposedly with good intentions. It proposes a set of missional rules for the right way to be missional that a church is supposed to adopt in order to become what God wants it to be.

Adopting the right behaviors will not develop the capacity to produce *missio Dei* in either individuals or the church. “Focusing on behavior and motivating self-effort miss the real issue. Rather, we need the Spirit to do the inside transforming work in our lives that only he can do.”⁹⁷ In the same way, we cannot behave our way into being “a sign,

⁹⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 147.

instrument, and foretaste of God's coming kingdom." We need to participate in the way of the Spirit so that the capacity of the church is transformed in a way that only the Spirit can do.

The End Determines the Means (the Practices)

In order to develop an alternative to the try harder approach, it is helpful to develop a rightly framed image of God's *telos*. In his *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, Jonathan Edwards addresses the question of God's end for creation (and therefore the end of God's mission) through the lens of theological aesthetics. While the argument is highly nuanced and complex, his basic premise establishes the fact that God, being infinite triune beauty, creates so that the other might enter into the *telos* of enjoying the ultimate beauty that God is. The point of creation is for creation to know God, to love God, and to take joy in God. In other words, the end is to live in the ever-flowing emanation of God's fountain of beauty of the triune God. Edwards writes,

[This] is what God had respect to as an ultimate end of his creating the world, to communicate of his own infinite fullness of good; . . . that there might be a glorious and abundant emanation of his infinite fullness of good ad extra, or without himself, and the supposition to communicate himself or diffuse his own fullness, which we must conceive of as being originally in God as a perfection of his nature, was what moved him to create the world.⁹⁸

The fullness of God is the beginning of all things and, at the same time, the fullness of God is the *telos* of all things. Creation flows out of God's infinitude for the sake of being included in that infinitude. Hart writes,

As Maximus the Confessor says, our end is our beginning, our logoi are found in God's Logos, we come to be in God, by participation. That which is most interior to us, "essence," is the most exterior: we become what we are by finitely

⁹⁸ Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," 433-34.

traversing the infinitely accomplished “exteriority” of the Trinity, appropriating what is “ours” only through an original surrender on every ground.⁹⁹

That which we are moving toward, the *telos* of our being, is not becoming something new, nor is it something that we discover by our trying to make it happen by our efforts. The triune being of God (the *imago Dei*) which began all things is also the end toward which we are moving. We could imagine it this way:



Figure 18: God’s Telos

The future to which we are moving (depicted by the image on the far right) already belongs in God’s triune being because the expansiveness of God includes all things, an expansiveness that is defined by the distance that God traveled on the cross to include all things. All things are in God already because God is roomy¹⁰⁰ as he has space in his being for all possibilities.¹⁰¹ Because the cross reveals the love of God, and because the cross demonstrates the infinite distance that he is willing to go for the sake of the

⁹⁹ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 244.

¹⁰⁰ See Jenson, 1:226.

¹⁰¹ While one need not embrace the proposal of Open Theism in order to embrace this view of God’s expansive nature, the idea that God “overknows” the future and therefore knows every possible response of every other and therefore in his infinite wisdom is able to respond to each response with actions that make the most room possible for the other to participate in God’s redemptive life is helpful. See Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*.

other, God's being is the expanse of love that exists for all time, a divine capacity (*capax Dei*) that has room for every possible reaction and response of the other. Therefore, the *telos* of creation is to allow oneself to be taken up into that great expanse or capacity of love.

The high priestly prayer found in John 17 reflects this *telos*, especially the following section:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

This prayer speaks to the end for which Jesus was “sent” by the Father (vs. 25) as his end was to make the way of the Father known, which is for the purpose of the love that the Father has for the Son being in those who believe and that Jesus himself might live in them (vs. 26). In so doing—as the Son is in the believers—the aim is for the believers to live in unity (“be one” vs. 21) as the Father and Son are one. The eternal overflowing, unnecessary, endless beauty that characterizes the Father-Son-Spirit are also to characterize those who “believe in [Jesus]” (vs. 20). As Newbigin observes,

The prayer of Jesus is for a unity which is a real participation of believers in the love and obedience which unites Jesus with the Father, a participation which is as invisible as the flow of sap which unites the branches with the vine, and which is

at the same time as visible as the unity of branch and vine—as visible as the love and obedience of Jesus.¹⁰²

The *telos* then is for Christ to live “in them” as the Father lives in Christ to result in unity where the hidden and mysterious dimension has actual practical and visible ramifications for the way that the church operates.

This unity is the “glory” (beauty) of Jesus that has existed from “before the creation of the world” (vs. 24), an image that harkens back to the Johannine prologue where it reads: “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The glory that the church is to see is none other than the glory that God is, which is ultimately revealed on the cross. Jesus is praying for a future of complete unity that results from perceiving the glory or beauty of complete unity. Boyd writes, “This means that God’s ultimate goal in creation is nothing less than for the very same perfect love that the Father has for his own Son to be given to us and to be placed within us. . . . We become the recipients of the Father’s eternal love for the Son because we are in the Son as he is perfectly loved, and the Son is in us, as he is perfected loved.”¹⁰³ Then as we do this, “the world will believe that [the Father] has sent [the Son].”

This end defines the means that are appropriate to that end. Only God can include the other in this unity of God. This is not something that can be produced by trying harder. The church participates in the mission of God by the means of the Spirit.

¹⁰² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 235.

¹⁰³ Gregory A. Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 59-60.

Even More Beauty

In addition, the *telos* is not only for creatures to love, know, and take joy in God's beauty but to live into God's own knowledge of Godself, to indwell in God's own love shared between the Father-Son-Spirit, and to participate in God's own rejoicing. The word that Edwards coined to describe this is "remanation," by which he infers that God's unending beauty goes forth to the extent that creatures can both receive it and return it. God descends in love revealing that God has enough room in Godself for every response, even to the point of allowing others to put him to death, but even more he ascends and takes up every response and transforms them.¹⁰⁴

God did not merely save "the world" (John 3:16) by emanating his love toward the world in a unilateral way, but he did that which is "more than necessary." He responded to the Father in the stead of creation as remanation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines remanation as "The flowing back or return of something to the source whence it emanated." God's love is so excessive that it goes beyond emanating toward humanity. It also draws humans up in to the faithful response Christ gave on the cross toward the Father. If we see God's triune love as merely emanating from the source or beginning of God—as proposed in the section above—then the beauty of God only flows

¹⁰⁴ Edwards writes, "The emanation or communication of the divine fullness, consisting in the knowledge of God, love to God, and joy in God, has relation indeed both to God and the creature: but it has relation to God as its fountain, as it is an emanation from God; and as the communication itself, or thing communicated, is something divine, something of God, something of his internal fullness; as the water in the stream is something of the fountain; and as the beams are of the sun. And again, they have relation to God as they have respect to him as their object: for the knowledge communicated is the knowledge of God; and so God is the object of the knowledge: and the love communicated, is the love of God; so God is the object of that love: and the happiness communicated, is joy in God; and so he is the object of the joy communicated. In the creature's knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned. Here is both an emanation and remanation. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original. So the whole is of God, and in God, and to God; and God is the beginning, middle, and end of this affair," Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," 531.

out in a linear way like a river where the Father is the Source, the Son is the Wellspring, and the Spirit is the Living Water.¹⁰⁵ However, when we include remanation in the life of God, which was put on display on the cross, we see the returning movement of God, the constant movement of descending and ascending. The movement is not merely unilateral or linear like a river, but a current that flows like a Möbius strip or an infinity symbol that moves forward in the river of time. The unilateral emanation from God to the world is not enough. Without the remanation of Christ by the Spirit, the call to be faithful before God falls upon humanity, something which the narratives of the Old Testament make abundantly clear is actually impossible to do. As Paul rhetorically argued with polemical and even sarcastic language in this letter to the Galatian church, “Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3). The way we get in the door of our life in Christ—by grace through faith in the Spirit—is the way that we stay in, which is the way that we participate in God’s mission.

Therefore, the work of God, and thereby the mission of God, is fulfilled both on the side of God where his love emanates toward us and he also fulfills the response of creatures to God where his love remanates through us to God. Edwards writes, “The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original.”¹⁰⁶ God is thus faithful to emanate his love toward us as an expression of his endless “more than necessary” nature, and he goes even further to remanate that love on our behalf. Jesus loves (as expressed in the full obedience on the cross) the Father in

¹⁰⁵ Cunningham.

¹⁰⁶ Edwards, “Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” 351.

our place, and now the Spirit comes to include us in on the love that Jesus has for the Father.¹⁰⁷ We therefore are drawn into the life the Spirit's work of triune mission. T. F. Torrance makes this point by demonstrating how the Incarnation is a movement of descending and ascending:

It is in that whole movement of descent and ascent, *katabasis* and *anabasis* that we are to understand the movement of the Word and Son of God into our human existence, gathering our human existence into oneness with himself, and then the movement of the Word and Son of God from within our humanity back to the heavenly Father, a movement which restores humanity to communion with God but far transcends the original creation in the nature of the union which that communion involves.¹⁰⁸

The "more than necessary" God descends and then takes us up "in Christ" into the being of God "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Eph. 1:10).¹⁰⁹ This stands in contrast to a view of mission where God does his part by descending and now it is up to us to do all of the right things in order to finish what he started. The end of our receiving the emanation of God and our joining in God's remanation through us is also the *telos* of creation. The way that others are included in

¹⁰⁷ T. F. Torrance writes, "[T]he incarnation of the Word means an incarnation in which the Word is not simply addressed to man from without but also enters into human existence that it becomes a word that is answered for man by this man in the whole course of his obedient life" Thomas F. Torrance and Robert T. Walker, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, Rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 68. This is also related to the Pauline use of the genitive which can be translated as either objective "faith in Christ" or subjective "faithfulness of Christ. See N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2013).

¹⁰⁸ Torrance and Walker, 77.

¹⁰⁹ The theology of recapitulation of Irenaeus is helpful in understanding this point. He writes, "He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam . . . The enemy would not have been fairly vanquished, unless it had been a man [born] of woman who conquered him. . . . And therefore does the Lord profess Himself to be the Son of man, comprising in Himself that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned, in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death," Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, vol. 1, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885), 5.21.1.

this emanation and remanation depends upon the church participating in God's emanation and remanation, not on "trying harder" to accomplish God's mission without the presence of God. The overflow of God thus continues and the church receives the descending of the triune love and as it makes space for the ascending of the triune love to be expressed through the church to the Father. In this way, the church becomes a distinct sign, witness and instrument of God's *telos* of beauty. Thus, the over-abundant, more than necessary, beauty of God extends toward and enfolds creation so that we might enter into the life of the end of God's beauty in the now.

Edwards writes, "'Tis a thing infinitely good in itself that God's glory should be known by a glorious society of created beings. And there should be in them an increasing knowledge of God to all eternity in an existence, a reality infinitely worth to be, and worth to be valued and regarded by him, to whom it belongs in order that it be, which, of all things possible, is fittest and best."¹¹⁰ The way that the church becomes this "glorious society of created beings" depends upon the church's capacity to participate in God. Only by God are God's people formed to be participants in God's mission. Ephesians 2:18 reads: "For through him [Jesus] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." Everything about God towards us originates in the Father, as we saw in the section above on the beauty of the Poetics of God. This movement of the Father descends through the revelation of Jesus on the cross and then through the Spirit to draw others back up into the life of the Son who lives in complete unity with the Father. This is the way that the remanation occurs. We might illustrate it this way:

¹¹⁰ Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," 431-32.



Figure 19: Remanation

As the *telos* of the being of God moves back on us in the present, we are drawn up into the faithfulness of Christ displayed on the cross before the Father. This is a symbol of infinity. The mission of God extends from the Father through the Son by the Spirit, and then we are drawn back up into the mission of God by the Spirit with the Son before the Father. In this way, the Spirit develops the capacity to participate in God's missional ontology.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the broad-based topic of theological aesthetics and three specific theological/biblical lenses that are shaped by the beauty of God. Specifically, the beauty that is rooted in God's triune being (the *imago Dei*), the revelation of God's being on the cross (the *crucis Dei*), and the *telos* of God's being (*capax Dei*) are three lenses that have a direct bearing upon the Poetics, Performance, and Practices of the missional church. God is beautiful, God acts beautifully, and God's beauty is such that there is room for others who are not God to participate in that beauty. This sets up the practical research reported in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this previous two chapters, I introduced the theoretical and the theological lenses that were used for this research project, based on the purpose of exploring and reporting on how pastors who have been trained in the theology and practice of missional church as participation in the triune God have been influenced by theological aesthetics as they have sought to lead their congregations into mission. This chapter surveys the methodology employed for the practical research to address the specific research question that informed the theoretical and theological lenses of the previous two chapters. The specific research question is:

How has a theological aesthetics informed the way missional pastors lead?

More specifically, the research sought to understand the leadership roles adopted that promoted the beauty of God's Poetics, God's Performance and God's Practices. One might illustrate it this way:

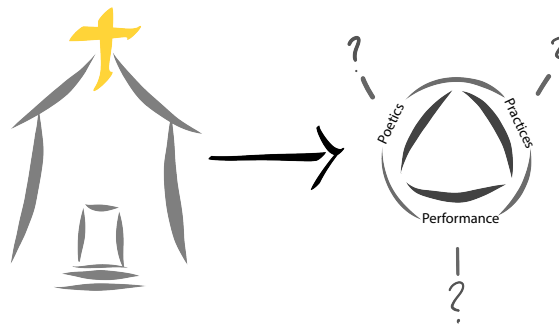


Figure 20: The Question of Leadership Roles

By identifying roles adopted by pastors who are leading their churches toward “participating in God’s mission,” it will be possible to promote roles that have been shaped by God’s beauty to other leaders, develop training resources that align with these roles, and even mentor young pastors accordingly. This will help propel the beauty of the innovation of missional church beyond the limits of what is possible if missional church is only viewed through the lenses of truth and goodness.

Methodology

Exploratory research, which is also called formulative research, is performed in order to ascertain the issues and additional questions that pertain to a research question that has not been thoroughly studied. The goal of such research is to define problems and develop idiographic knowledge. This kind of work “presumes that meaningful knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences.”¹ This project is “exploratory” for two reasons. First, very little research has been performed on how missional church is being translated from the level of theology and theory into local congregations. Even less research has been performed within the specific stream of missional church as contextual engagement, the fifth view introduced in chapter two. The second reason relates to the questions raised through the lens of theological aesthetics. Because the relationship between beauty and missional church has not been explored—at the theological level much less the practical level of missional leadership—it is important to explore how leaders have adapted their language, the practices, and their performance of leadership in

¹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 41.

the light of the beauty of God's mission. In other words, there is potential for a more robust missional theology if we explore how pastors are leading the missional church in evocative ways.

The project is based on case study research. "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident."² Through case studies, the stories of how beauty has influenced the leadership of those guiding their churches into the innovation of missional church were revealed.

The focus of these case studies is on the pastoral leaders who have been directly influenced by the view of missional church as triune participation. The theological justification for this will be explained below.

Method

The method used for the exploratory cases studies was qualitative interviews. As outlined in detail below, after identifying four pastors to study, I interviewed each pastoral leader individually, after studying the demographics of their contexts and their church websites. Then I developed a series of notes and reflections about the content of the interviews.

In the first iterations of my method, I intended to gather a focus group from each church and interview them to understand how they were perceiving the work of the pastor. In addition, I had planned to gather all of the pastors interviewed individually for

² Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Fifth ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), 16.

an extended conversation about how theological aesthetics might generate further innovations regarding how they lead. However, since the topic of theological aesthetics as it relates to missional church has not been explored, the work to prepare for the initial interviews of the pastors was so extensive that I had to limit the practical research to that of initiating exploratory research. This initial research will serve as a starting point for further exploratory research that examines these questions that were initially proposed.

Theological Framework for Methodology

The methodology of this research is grounded in the specific view of missional church as “participating in God’s mission” as promoted by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile.³ While their writings do not specifically employ the language of theological aesthetics, they provide a fertile seedbed that makes space for the creation of environments and experiences whereby divine beauty can be expressed and perceived. This theological frame informs how the participants in this study were chosen, as all have directly studied and/or worked with Van Gelder. The following provides a broad-based summary of the key points that Van Gelder develops regarding the meaning of participating in God’s mission and an explanation as to why each point sets up the advancement of theological aesthetics in relation to missional church. This creates an imagination whereby one sees the work of God as a creative dialectic where the sending of God occurs at the point of encounter with the reality of context. There are five points to consider.

³ For a culminating analysis of this theological perspective of the missional church as it applies to the North American context see Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*.

First, Van Gelder's writings establish the case that because God is triune the church is missionary by nature, as opposed to the mission being merely a function of the church. He writes of the need to "integrate our understanding of church and mission" because both are rooted in the "Triune God in mission to all of creation."⁴ This view of a church confronts the common view where the church is first defined apart from mission and therefore mission becomes one of the functions that are carried out in order to be an effective church. The following image is an interpretation of the functionalist view that Van Gelder challenges. In this image, communion with God (C), relationships within the church (R), and mission (M) are viewed as distinct purposes or functions that the church produces.

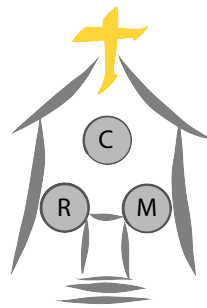


Figure 21: Functionalist View of Church

Instead, mission provides an imagination where mission is integrated into the being of the church. He writes,

Understanding the church as being missionary by nature represents a more holistic way of thinking about mission. In this view, the Spirit-created church lives as the very body of Christ in the world. Its existence declares that the full power of God's redemptive work is already active in the world through the Spirit.⁵

⁴ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, 31.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

This sets up the conversation to understand the meaning of the mission of God as about perceiving and expressing divine beauty that is on mission in the world.

Second, Van Gelder emphasizes that the mission of God is the redemption of all of creation, not merely that of individual souls or the establishing of missional churches. This speaks to his emphasis on context. As illustrated by the fact that he drafted the two chapters in *Missional Church* on the context of North America, he acknowledges that the missional church is a church in context, not a franchised expression of some kind of predetermined missional program.⁶ In addition, his emphasis lies on the fact that the context has shifted in North America and therefore leaders of historical expressions of the church are now required to rethink how they operate as a missional church in this new context. Van Gelder and Zscheile write, “Culture is not something out there that the church enters to engage in ministry. Rather, the church is fully enmeshed in its host culture even as it seeks to live out a redemptive lifestyle within its local context.”⁷ This view of church in culture opens up the conversation for how beauty is diverse and co-created with God, as opposed to a form that is to be replicated based on the demand of God.

Third, the importance of context is founded upon the conviction that the triune God is at work in the world beyond the bounds of the church. The context of creation provides the stage where the Spirit is at work. Fundamentally, the work of the Spirit is found in specific ways, the first being the world at large. Van Gelder writes, “The larger horizon of the ministry of the Spirit is always the world. We should therefore expect to

⁶ Guder et al., 18-76.

⁷ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, 59.

see the manifestation of the power and presence of the Spirit sustaining and preserving the well-being of all of creation.” The second is that of human community in that God “breathed” the Spirit into Adam and the work of the Spirit is to re-create fallen humanity so that it might “realize the full possibilities of what God intended within creation design.”⁸ This sets the stage for how beauty arises in unexpected and serendipitous ways on the fringes, advancing the mission of God in ways that cannot be planned from the center. This means that the beauty of God can be seen in direct ways where God’s mission is overtly accomplished and in indirect ways where God is at work to subvert the repulsive and raise up beauty of ashes.

Fourth, there is an overt confrontation of the Western view of the Trinity where the Father sends the Son, who both send the Spirit who sends forth the church.⁹ This unilateral view of mission—while it might very well root the identity of the church in mission—places the mission upon the backs of human agents. As a result, the *missio Dei* is something that God sends forth the church to either “embody the reign of God” before a watching world or to “witness to the reign of God” within the world.¹⁰ Mission is not then something that God is doing in which the church participates. Instead it is something that the church does to fulfill its sentness. In order to base an alternative view in God, Van Gelder and Zscheile argue from a view based on an Eastern view of the Trinity which is social in nature. This perichoretic view where “[a]ll three persons of the divine community mutually indwell one another in relational unity while maintaining their

⁸ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, 30-31.

⁹ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

distinct identity”¹¹ provides a basis for a view of missional church based in the agency of God. Therefore, “[T]he church, through the redemptive work of Christ, [is] being created by the Spirit as a social community that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God’s mission in the world.”¹² This provides an understanding for the Spirit who participates in all creation to make the church participants in God’s beauty, not merely something which the church works to produce.

Fifth, because God is at work in the world, the missional church as triune participation then is when “the church participates in God’s continuing creation and redemptive mission. People in the church pursue God’s mission in the world both as cocreative creatures engaging with God in the Spirit’s continuing work in all creation and by bearing witness to the reign of God.”¹³ Therefore, for Van Gelder, missional church as triune participation means that the church is participating in God’s triune agency, Spirit-led work both within the life of the church and in in the local context. “It is a community that constantly looks for signs of the Spirit’s leading in its own life and in the surrounding neighborhood.”¹⁴ The mission of God is not limited to the work of the Spirit within the bounds of the church, which is built upon the sending view of the Trinity, where the church is sent into the world, and a God-church-world order. Instead, “[a] participatory

¹¹ Ibid., 54. Moltmann describes perichoresis as the “intimate indwelling and complete interpenetration of the persons in one another.” It “denotes that trinitarian unity which goes out beyond the doctrine of persons and their relations: by virtue of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately with one another, for one another, and in one another that they constitute themselves in their unique, incomparable and complete unity,” Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 86.

¹² Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, 88.

¹³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, 119.

understanding opens up a highly reciprocal view of the God-world-church relationships, in which the church shares in the Triune God's own vulnerable engagement with the world.”¹⁵ This creates an imagination whereby one sees the work of God as a creative dialectic where the sending of God occurs at the point of encounter with the reality of context.

With regard to the performance of living this theological perspective of missional church, Van Gelder offers seven aptitudes that facilitate the movement toward participation in God’s mission. These also provided a starting point for understanding how the participants in this research project discovered how theological aesthetics influenced their missional leadership.¹⁶

- Learn to read a context as they seek their contextuality.
- Anticipate new insights into the gospel.
- Anticipate reciprocity.
- Understand they are contextual and, therefore, are also particular.
- Understand that ministry is always contextual, and therefore, is also practical.
- Understand that doing theology is always contextual and, therefore, is also perspectival.
- Understand that organization is always contextual, and therefore is also provisional.

Using the language introduced in chapter three, Craig Van Gelder’s view is an innovation offering a paradigm shift. Those chosen for this research have built on this paradigm as pastoral pioneers who are trying to work out what this theology means in their local contexts. The question asked here seeks to understand the roles they have adopted that align with God’s beauty as they develop a lived theology of “participating in God’s mission.”

¹⁵ Ibid., 111.

¹⁶ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, 63-66.

Research Design

The research was conducted in three phases. The following is a brief narrative summary of each phase.

Phase 1: Identification of Leaders to Study

The first phase was to identify pastors to study. The determining factors revolved around characteristics of the pastor leader. The criteria used for selecting these leaders included the following:

- The pastoral leader received either a Doctor of Ministry or Doctor of Philosophy degree in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary.
- The pastoral leader espouses the view of missional church as triune participation as introduced by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile in their book *Missional Church in Perspective*.
- The pastoral leader has worked with a team in his or her church to introduce this view of missional church.
- The pastor tends to have a creative orientation.
- The pastor is willing to participate in the study.

In order to select the pastors to study, I surveyed the dissertations of graduates from the CML program from the past ten years to develop a list of pastoral leaders who are focused on pastoral leadership and communicate with a creative orientation. I chose three which appeared to meet the criteria above, and I set up an initial appointment to speak with them about their willingness to participate in this study. Unexpectedly, a fourth pastor that fit these criteria contacted me about another matter, and I asked him to participate in the research. This study is limited to four pastors so as to focus the research and go deeper into the how each pastor employs Poetics, Performance, and Practices that integrates theological aesthetics.

Phase 2: Preliminary Research

The second phase involved the preparation for the interviews. I read the dissertations written by the pastoral leaders, analyzed the church's websites, and analyzed contextual data of the neighborhoods in which the churches are located. I field tested the interview protocols and then adjusted the questions based on the feedback.

Phase 3: Pastoral Interview

The next phase entailed the actual interview of the pastors. My interview protocol focused on three specific things. First, I sought to understand the view of the missional church that they embraced through their studies in the CML program at Luther Seminary. The aim was to ascertain the Poetics (language, art, story, poetry, multi-media presentations, etc.) they use to communicate what it means to be missional. Secondly, based on the theses that they wrote, I asked questions about how what they learned through the program has been translated in the way that they practice leadership. In other words, how is it different from previous ways of leading. Third, I sought to understand the various ways that these pastors have guided their churches to perform missional church. After these interviews, I wrote extensive notes in a journal about my initial impressions and interpretations of what was shared. These notes were refined and developed to identify key points that correspond with leadership that is formed by theological aesthetics.

Interpretation of Data

I analyzed my notes along with the transcriptions of the interviews in order to identify patterns. Because this project is limited to initial exploratory research that has the aim of inaugurating the conversation between theological aesthetics and missional

leadership, the patterns identified focused on broad-based themes to ascertain the specific ways that these leaders promoted Poetics, Performance, and Practices. The point of the interpretation of the data was to ascertain the degree to which they did or did not lead according to roles that aligned with the theological aesthetics defined by Poetics, Performance, and Practices, and thereby identify corresponding leadership roles. This analyzation did not focus on the specific language used by these pastors but on the larger narratives that these pastors used to describe how they lead. I performed this interpretation by sorting the themes I identified in the transcripts, summarizing the specific contribution of each pastor to those themes, and then comparing the differences between them.¹⁷ As such, this form of interpretation aligns with initial exploratory research that aims to set an agenda for additional practical research.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the nature of the exploratory research that is appropriate to the question raised in this project. It provided a theological basis for why the subjects chosen for this research are appropriate, that is why “participating in God’s mission” is a logical starting point for researching the lived theology of theological aesthetics. Then it provided an overview of the phases of the practical research, which was done through interviews of four pastors. A basic overview of these pastors and their churches will be provided in the following chapter, along with the themes that emerged.

¹⁷ This process of interpretation is based on that found in Rubin and Rubin, 224ff.

CHAPTER 6

CASE STUDIES

The data collected to answer the practical question of this research project are derived from four exploratory case study interviews of pastoral leaders who are guiding their churches toward the view of missional church called “participating in God’s mission.” This chapter describes the churches and contexts in which they are set. This is followed by a summary of the themes that emerged, specifically the leadership roles of Poet, Host, and Spiritual Director, each of which corresponds with the lenses of Poetics, Performance, and Practices.

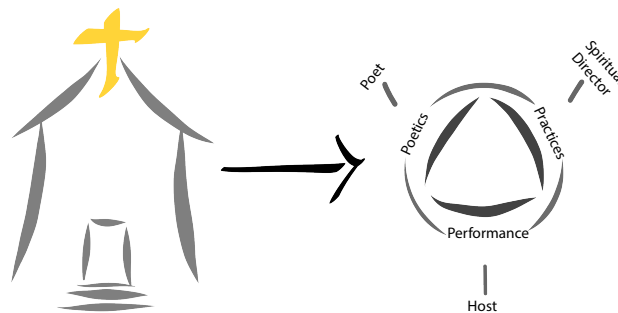


Figure 22: The Roles of Missional Leaders

The exploratory interviews revealed how the pastors adopted the interactive roles of Poet, Host, and Spiritual Director. However, an unexpected theme emerged, the role of the Navigation Guide who guides the church on a Pilgrimage toward missional church. This role requires an added element and raises the question of its relationship to beauty.

Each description is organized into three parts: (1): a brief overview of the church and its context, (2) an introduction to the leader and his or her strengths, (3) the unique

contribution of the leader to the conversation of missional leadership as it relates to theological aesthetics.

Church in the Suburbs

The first pastor has focused his research and leadership on trying to understand what the mission of God means in the suburban context. Pastor Suburb has served in two mainline churches within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America that are set in second-ring suburbs of a large metropolitan city. These contexts are comprised of a mix of new construction in the midst of established neighborhoods, and the people attending these churches are typically white, middle-class families with children in middle and high school. On the surface, these contexts do not stand out, however in the missional church conversation they are significant. For the most part, the missional church tends to be first worked out in urban areas, in suburban contexts where there is new construction, or in churches that are declining. These are the three settings where there has been the most felt-need for the missional church. However, the churches where Pastor Suburb has served are thriving established churches that could continue doing church as it has been done and remain successful. For instance, the church where Pastor Suburb serves at the present has two worship sites where 1400 people worship each weekend. It is successful enough that it could continue being an attractional, Constantinian church, but its leaders are exploring new paths of mission.

Pastor Suburb

The pastor whom I interviewed has served as the pastor of adult formation in both churches. In his current role, he works as a part of a four-member pastoral team, one of whom is the senior pastor. The most unique strength of Pastor Suburb is his artistic skill.

He communicates through sketches and paintings, seeking to evoke an imagination to draw those he leads into the conversation. He confesses that his use of art in his leadership is not an intentional strategy, but it is just an expression of who he is and how he thinks. His work has focused on the intersection of the imagination and spiritual formation. This is especially important in a modern context that is driven by the visual medium of social media.

Poetics in the Suburbs

While Pastor Suburb employs Poetics, Performance, and Practices in his missional leadership, his unique contribution to this conversation is most obvious with regard to his poetry. His artistic skills illustrate how aesthetics sparks the imagination to perceive what God is doing in the world.

For instance, he developed short animated films that explore the meaning of the triune God, asked a group to view them, and then invited them to gather to express their responses. In another event, he drew a large black and white line image of the cross, cut it into 8.5 x 11 sheets, and passed out sections of it to different groups with instructions for adding color. When groups had completed the project, all the parts were brought together to make a large image of the cross. These are two examples of creative expressions that he has used to create a space where people can develop the ability to perceive God's mission in the world. They are indirect ways of conveying God's beautiful work that draws people into the truth and goodness of mission by allowing people to see God's expression for themselves rather than telling them overtly what to think or do.

Pastor Suburb reports, "The image carries its own horizon, its own voice. It does not matter what the intent of the artist was. The image lives for itself. As people

encounter the image, they bring their own stuff to it. . . . My teaching has evolved where I draw an image and throw it up there, and they come up with stuff that I never even thought about.” The poetic expression is a gift that invites others to engage and discover for themselves its meaning. This is not only true of art he creates. Pastor Suburb has used *Dwelling in the Word* in a similar way.¹ Instead of acting as the Bible expert who explains the meaning, this practice offers the Scripture as a gift whereby many can offer their perceptions of it in order to have their imaginations shifted. The biblical poetry sets the stage for others to enter into God’s imagination and to be evoked in such a way that they are desirous to participate.

Church in the Urban Setting

The second pastor has focused his leadership on the nature of the mission of God in an urban setting. The context of Pastor Urban’s church is a traditionally blue-collar region of a large mid-western city that flourished with immigrants in the 1930s and 1940s. Today, it remains primarily a working-class neighborhood that is quite diverse, with established families of third and fourth generations who have remained over the decades.

The church itself is intentionally a neighborhood-focused congregation that was launched in the later years of the first decade of the new millennium with the aim of participating in God’s mission in this setting. The pastors reside in this part of the city, the church meets in a local school even though they are large enough to purchase their own worship space, and the focus of the ministry lies on this specific geographic sector.

¹ This spiritual practice will be further explored in chapter eight.

In fact, they are quite clear in their communication about this fact, to such a degree that those living outside that specific neighborhood must feel called to invest there.

Pastor Urban

Pastor Urban initiated the church plant, however he is not the senior pastor. In fact, they do not have one. Instead, he is a part of a four-person pastoral team who all share equal leadership authority and all serve bi-vocationally. Even though he possesses the education, skills, and experience to take the lead as a tradition senior pastor, he and the team began the church with the goal of developing a polity that did not depend upon one person to do the work of ministry. This illustrates the unique contribution his leadership offers to this conversation. He confesses that while he possesses the attributes that lead to power and privilege in our cultural setting, his goal is to lead in such a way that it fosters an environment for others to have equal input into the life of the community. In other words, he leads in a way that seeks to perform the life of the triune God.

Performance in the Urban Setting

Pastor Urban confessed, “Wouldn’t it be amazing to draw a diagram of our leadership structure and say ‘This reflects who God is.’” While not claiming that their church has actually developed such a structure, this is the reason they lead the way that they do. They want to perform their leadership in a way that looks like the love of the Father-Son-Spirit. Admittedly, this is not as effective or efficient as other models of leadership, and they openly confess this reality. They operate on the assumption that the way that they lead says as much about what they want to communicate as the words that they use. He states, “One of the things that has been important to us is to learn about how

the shape of what we are doing can communicate the content of what we are trying to communicate.”

This is not merely about modeling for the sake of replication or some other utilitarian purpose. It is simply because this reflects the image of God that they want to offer the world. It is a performance of church leadership that requires extensive dialogue. When there is no leader where the “buck stops,” the leadership enters into deep listening to one another, with faith that God is at work through the conversations. He explains, “Dialogue has shaped us in that it is the primary/sole form of discernment and decision making for us. I have felt like our conversations have been the source of vision for the church. It’s also endlessly frustrating because it takes so much longer to do anything. But the ownership that comes out of those conversations has been a lot higher.”

The aspect that relates to beauty is the fact that the leadership operates in such a way that is in and of itself compelling and evocative. Because the leadership performs the message as they do, their way of being says more about the church than what they say.

Church by the University

The third pastor has explored the mission of God in an established city neighborhood in a diverse university setting. This Episcopal church is over a century and a quarter old in an established neighborhood which was originally designed for upper-class residents. Through the years, it has remained an appealing and thriving neighborhood within a large metropolitan area. Set near various colleges and universities, this is a community full of students, professors, and internationals who are studying on visas.

While the church has a presence in the community, those who are most faithful actually drive to worship from all over the city. Those in the community, by and large, show very little interest in organized religion, however, they are quite invested in social justice and policy issues. Therefore, when the church engages at that level, the community responds quite passionately to their efforts.

Pastor University

The rector of this congregation has served for over twelve years. Having originally been trained in CEO leadership style where the pastor is expected to take charge and make things happen, she confesses that leading people into mission has been a shift for her. While it is natural for her to lead collaboratively, she had been formed in an imitation of God mindset, where collaboration was merely a means to accomplish the tasks of mission. Her emphasis has been on promoting practices, and more specifically on fostering environments where people can listen to one another and thereby make space for hearing the Spirit's leading. This has shaped the church in such a way that its mission in the world is being formed to be a listening congregation.

Practices in the University Context

When she arrived at this church, she found a group of caring people with huge hearts to meet needs, but they were tired from the work. They operated from the imagination that went something like this, "God loves us so much and created this beautiful world, but it went awry. God left and it's up to us to clean it up." By shifting the imagination from imitation to participation in God, she has been able to guide people into the agency of God, where mission would be performed through practices of entering into

God's life. As a result, God would be the primary actor in mission, thereby removing the pressure to fix the world.

This began through a two-year process of discernment where the church identified eight spiritual practices that are meant to shape who they are as a congregation. These include: story, prayer, simplicity, discernment, reconciliation, hospitality, generosity, and gratitude. In the interview, she used the word "mined" many times in reference to how these practices are part of the life of the church. They are not programs or merely content that are part of a curriculum. They are introduced and then reviewed repeatedly in creative ways. One of the ways that this is done is through the use of spiritual direction in the sermons, which has fostered a way for a more participatory worship experience. Another is through the development of a listening ministry that resembles the clearness committee experience of which Parker Palmer writes.²

Church in the Exurbs

The fourth pastor has focused his leadership on the nature of the mission of God in a rather under-resourced county that has been deemed economically and socially as one of the worst places to live in the nation. Within the county is one white-collar town of about 40,000 people where this church of 1500 is set. While it resembles a suburb, it is not actually near a large city, however, it lies close enough to two economic centers to which people can commute for employment.

The church was built according to a traditional attractional, programmatic model where about 2000 people worshipped each weekend. However, in 2009, the pastor at the

² See Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

time felt compelled by the Spirit to lead the church in a different direction. Instead of investing in a larger building, he started moving toward a multi-site strategy. This resulted in the launching of seven other campuses. After developing multiple campuses, a new pastor was hired to move the church toward mission. He proceeded to deconstruct all the programmatic ministry, including traditional ministries that occurred in the building and small group Bible studies. His goal was to emphasize missional communities. The pastor I interviewed is the third pastor in this brief story and he leads the primary campus that launched the others.

Pastor Exurb

Pastor Exurb had been serving in his capacity for about eighteen months at the time of my interview. His emphasis is similar to that of his predecessor in that he aims to develop missional communities that focus on geographic locations. However, his approach is distinctive. He leads from a process that guides the church along a journey as opposed to a tear-down-the-old-and-start-the-new approach. He sees the need for clarity of vision, while at the same time focusing on achievable goals that provide next steps for people that are moving toward that vision. This combination of a large general vision with doable action where short-term victories can be experienced makes the idea of missional church compelling and attractive.

Pilgrimage in the Exurbs

This pastor has adopted forms of Poetics, Performance, and Practices that are appropriate to his context, however, his leadership emphasizes a fourth part that I am calling the Pilgrimage. Such a Pilgrimage was a part of my theoretical lenses introduced in chapter two—there expressed with the language of the process of innovation

diffusion—however I did not develop this category theologically in chapter four. As I entered into my research, the Pilgrimage taken to move toward beauty merely aligned with the natural way that people adopt any other innovation. I did not see how the Pilgrimage itself could serve as a contributing factor to the beauty of the innovation. However, through the interviews, all four pastors were guiding people along a Pilgrimage.

In contrast to the decision-based approach to missional leadership of his predecessor, Pastor Exurb has embraced the Pilgrimage, one that is adapted from the book *God Dreams* by Will Mancini and Warren Bird.³ While he expressed some concerns about the specific views of missional church that Mancini espouses, he found that this visioning process—when reinterpreted through a Spirit-led, communally-discerned, God-agency-framed, theoretically-informed lens⁴—provides a practical way to develop a vision that is Spirit-formed, while at the same time leaving space for adaptive discernment along the way. This has resulted in a vision that is clear and compelling, drawing the work of the church around a focused dream for the future. Pastor Exurb states, “The core picture behind the dream is from Ezekiel 47 where the trickle of water flows out the temple and grows into a massively wide river that produces an overflowing life through trees on the bank. It then flows into the Dead Sea and brings life where there is death. The dream is to be so filled with God’s Spirit together as a people that the Spirit would overflow within us like a river into every street and take everything that is decaying or dying and bring it to new life.”

³ Will Mancini and Warren Bird, *God Dreams: 12 Vision Templates for Finding and Focusing Your Church's Future* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2016).

⁴ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, 104-14.

In the context of this church, this specifically speaks to four areas of common life in this well-to-do exurb. They have named them as mediocre marriages, dysfunctional families, disconnected neighborhoods, and aimless, frenzied individuals who are stuck in the rat race of life.

The God dream that they have developed is not a mission statement. It is a mission description that seeks to foster a new imagination about what the church can look like that is specific enough to measure but flexible enough to address adaptive challenges along the way. As opposed to a strategic planning process where all the steps are outlined from the present until the completion of the vision, specific objectives are set out every ninety days in order to move toward the dream. While there are many specific aspects of this Pilgrimage that Pastor Exurb has implemented that are instructive, the crucial point to this research project is the reality that a concrete dream for the future of the church generates a sense of expectation, which fosters evocation.

Pastoral Roles

This initial exploratory research of these four pastors illustrates ways that aesthetics is shaping the way that they lead, even if they have not directly been influenced by this field of study. They are creating environments that foster Poetics, Performance, Practices, and Pilgrimage. Here I want to introduce four leadership roles that align with these aspects of beauty.

Poet

Art is not made as much as it is discovered. This is the work of the poet, the one who creates the gift in conversation with the pain and the joy of a specific context. Poets—a role I use to describe those who create with any media—create to evoke the

imagination and to foster safe places for other expressions of poets. We only learn to create by entering into the creativity of others who have preceded us. If one wants to learn to write a novel, the first and last step is to read other novelists, not to read literary critics. The church is waiting for poets to take the risk and set a course for local creativity so that others can learn from that. The pastoral leader as poet can serve as that example, not as the expert or the savant, but as the one who creates a safe place to offer what only he or she can offer with their unique creative gifts.

Host

The Performance of God's mission occurs through the creation of safe places for people to discover how God is at work and what their part is in that work. This is not about controlling the Performance in order to attain predetermined outcomes. It is about asking God questions about the real, the spaces of life where God too often gets left out of the conversation. It is also about being willing to allow the other to play the host, to enter into the space of those in the community and entering into dialogue so that the church might discover what God is doing through the other on their turf.

Spiritual Director

Spiritual directors facilitate practices for the formation of a people who participate in mission. These practices are both contemplative and active in nature. In the case of Pastor Exurb, the focus has been on active practices to foster environments for mission because this was undeveloped in his church. In the congregation led by Pastor University, the focus has been on the contemplative practices because the active had historically been an established strength.

Navigation Guide

A navigation guide leads people on the Pilgrimage. This stands in contrast to a destination orientation where the final product is determined and decisions combined with effort will lead to change. Instead, the guide recognizes the fact that the church will move toward its dream by addressing the reality of the next step. The guide works with where the church and the context is, not with some kind of ideal dream of where they think the church should be.

All four pastors have worked from a deep awareness of reality. While they have dreams for the church, they guide the church toward those dreams by meeting the people where they are and helping them see the agency of God in that place. This takes time and patience. These pastors are invested in the long-term process of participation in God's mission, not in quick fixes. At the same time, they recognize that the people they lead will only be attracted to this journey if they can see some level of short-term progress.

Conclusion

The interviews performed in this research project illustrate how the expression of God's beauty and, therefore, the perception of the beauty of how God works in the world has influenced these pastors' patterns of leadership. While much more research would be required to validate these initial findings, there exists enough exploratory evidence to confirm that the Poetics, Performance, and Practices of God's beauty has resulted in a distinct form of leadership that stands in contrast to those commonly promoted in church leadership training and literature. Also, this research resulted in the addition of a Pilgrimage of beauty, something which was not directly researched. The following image illustrates how these roles promote the beauty of God.

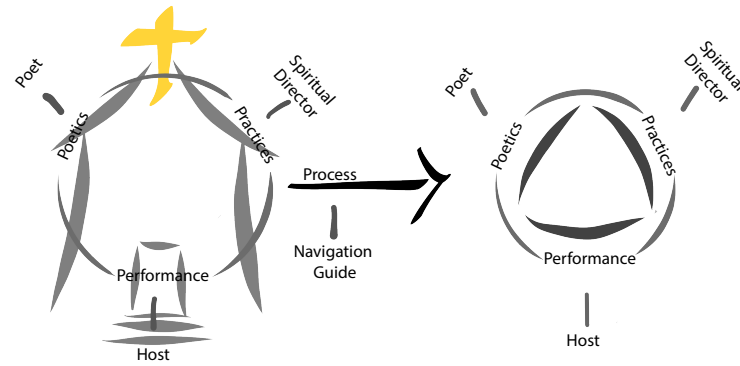


Figure 23: Poet, Host, Spiritual Director, Navigation Guide

The *Telos* of the beauty of God which is shaped by the beauty of *missio Dei*—its Poetics, Performance, and Practices on the right—are the means of leadership required on the left that foster participation in God’s beautiful mission. These roles are what leaders do to move a church from its current non-missional reality and through the Pilgrimage of participating in God’s mission. This research sets the stage for exploring further the perception of the *telos* of the missional church that is shaped by the beauty of *missio Dei*, thereby providing new language to express the meaning of missional church.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS: RE-EXPRESSING MISSIONAL CHURCH

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I provided a survey of the results of the research performed through interviews of pastoral leaders that I studied and introduced how theological aesthetics has influenced the way they have led and are leading their churches into missional church as triune participation. As stated, while the pastors may not have been overtly influenced by theological aesthetics, they nonetheless intuitively have adopted leadership patterns that are inherently shaped by divine beauty. There I observed how these leaders have adopted the leadership roles of poet, host, spiritual director, and navigation guide with varying degrees of emphasis. This chapter establishes the connection between the beauty of *missio Dei* and the *telos* of missional church that is defined by that beauty. It might be imagined this way:

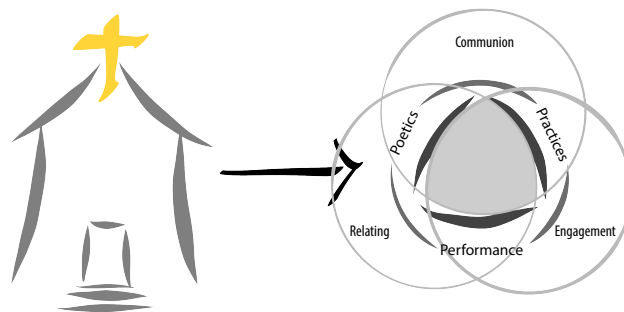


Figure 24: The Telos of Ecclesial Beauty

The *telos* of the church shapes the end toward which missional leadership is working, and thereby informs the leadership roles. The progression works from the beauty of *missio Dei*, to beauty of missional church, and then the beauty of missional leadership. The *telos* of the church is the divine beauty, as argued in chapter four, and the center of the Venn diagram to the far right is a way to imaginatively correlate ecclesial beauty with triune beauty. The *telos* of *missio Dei* defines the *telos* of missional church. This chapter argues that participation in God's missional beauty occurs as Communion, Relating, and Engagement are all expressed and perceived as being missional.

While this chapter is informed by the interviews, the proposal here of a church that is informed by theological aesthetics is primarily derived from the theology of God's beauty in chapter four. More specifically, this chapter aims to offer a way of re-imagining the missional church *telos* that is directly shaped by beauty. This is done first by offering an image of missional church as interactive improvisation, which is then followed by the Poetics, Performance, and Practices needed to support this kind of theater.

Missional Church Interactive Improvisation

The beauty of God is put on display through God's missional church as an experiential manifestation, an exhibition, a dramatic presentation. It is a drama that is so grand that it has the infinite ability to include all (remanate) in its movement. Vanhoozer writes, "The church . . . ought to be a theater of the gospel played out on the diverse cultural stages throughout the world: 'It is a special property of theater that everything on-stage is a sign.' Just as the actor's body is the chief vehicle for theatrical semiosis, so

Christ's body, the church, is the chief sign-bearer of God's love for the world."¹ In speaking about the way that the apostles of God have been sent, the Apostle Paul states "God has put us apostles on display" and they have "been made a spectacle" (1 Cor 4:9). The word most often translated as "spectacle" (*θέατρον*) can also be translated as "theater." In this passage, Paul is saying that the way that the apostles have been sent is a dramatic performance that represents the divine performance of the cross. Being that the church is "apostolic" or "missional," it is sent to perform the drama of God. The church is to live into the beauty that God is and thereby be a living sign or exhibition of God's life. The community of God serves as the cast which becomes a hermeneutic of God's beauty as it acts out the gospel.

Ultimately, this performance is an exhibition of the cross in the life of the church. This is not merely a message to be announced nor a moral code to be demanded. It is a "way, truth, and life" to be enacted, to be lived, to be put on display in the midst of God's creation. The church is to develop the capacity to live into the future that has come with the cruciform Messiah. To articulate the imagination of this lived theology with further clarity, it is helpful to understand the different kinds of theater as they relate to the beauty of *missio Dei*.

First, the most common kind of theater is stage performance, a dramatic presentation with a set script and a company of actors who have been formed to act out the script for an audience. While a live drama always calls for some kind of response from those watching, those not on the stage primarily play the role of spectators, and therefore the response is limited.

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 400.

The second form of theatre is called improvisation. This is a dramatic performance by a company of actors who have been formed to work together in order to act an unscripted drama for an audience. Samuel Wells writes, “Improvisation in the theater is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear.”² With improvisation, there is a group of actors who perform for a group of spectators.

The third kind of drama is interactive improvisation. Vanhoozer writes, “Interactive theater, unlike stage performance, is largely a matter of ‘ensemble improvisation.’ An ensemble, says Izzo, ‘is a group that shares three things mutually and in abundance: trust, play, and joy.’ . . . What makes interactive theater unique, however, is its goal of including those outside the company in the play as well. . . . Interactive theater is nonlinear, there is no overarching plot that the players must follow, just a series of ‘floating scenes’ as the guests wander into the festival.”³ This form of theater turns the world into its stage and invites observers to participate in its dramatic performance.

By putting theological aesthetics in conversation with missional church, it is possible to express and perceive the drama of missional church as interactive improvisation. This is an inherently non-violent form of drama, as the players guide but do not force the agenda upon the other. This missional drama entails every aspect of the life of the church as communion with God, the relationships within the church, and the engagement with the context all are missional. In contrast where it is common to see Communion, Relating, and Engagement as disintegrated functions of the church—

² Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, 1.

³ Vanhoozer, 416.

thereby relegating mission to the Engagement function—interactive improvisation is a way of being where Communion with the divine and the Relationships within the church are just as missional as any other aspect of the church's life. In fact, if true contextual engagement is transpiring, that context will have a direct influence on the way that the church Communes and Relates.

Therefore, the way that a church communes with God is just as missional as any act of evangelism, and the way that the members serve each other is equally missional as any social justice program. All are formed through a dialectic in the local context. God's beauty emanates through the way the church loves God, loves with one another, and engages their context. Being missional involves the integration of Communion, Relating, and Engagement as the Spirit remanates in the midst of the realities of life. All three are missional because all three are involved in the way the beauty of God emanates toward creation. The following Venn diagram demonstrates the overlapping and integrated nature of the life of mission. Therefore, we can imagine that the *telos* of the missional church as informed by the beauty of God is the shifting from a functional, disintegrated programmatic drama to one that is integrated.

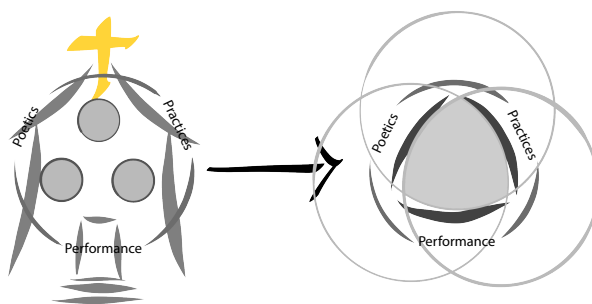


Figure 25: From Disintegration to Integration

As introduced in chapter five, the three circles on the left represent a functional view of the various activities of the church, where communion with God, community

relationships, and contextual engagement are viewed as inorganic, programmatic functions for the church to accomplish. The Poetics (a script), Practices (rehearsal), and Performance (production) are the means for shifting the church to the *telos* of God's beauty. Poetics is needed because the people of God must develop an imagination shaped by the reality that God is at work in the world. This is not merely about theological truths, ecclesiological principles, or moral goodness. This is about speaking the gospel of God that is faithful to the triune beauty of God's emanation and remanation. The Poetics that the church offers is an indirect way of shocking people into the truth.

Performance identifies the way that the church manifests or lives out the *missio Dei*. With God as the main actor, the *missio Dei* invites God's chosen cast to join the triune dance, as God includes others into the divine life. This *missio Dei* is made manifest by the missional church to the degree that God's chosen people perceive and express God's performance in the midst of a local context.

Practices are required because they shape the character of God's people. The degree that the church has developed the character of the *crucis Dei* is the degree to which it can knowingly and joyfully participate in the *missio Dei*. The Spirit shapes the church through practices that lead the people of God to the cross and empowers them to perform the *missio Dei*. This calls for the formation by the Spirit to have the capacity to see what God is up to in our world.

Poetics, Performance, and Practices form a triologue that shapes the imagination of the missional church that is consistent with the *missio Dei* as viewed through theological aesthetics. In this way, they each provide practical ways for God's leaders to

participate in the emanation and remanation of the Spirit so that the people of God can enter into what God is doing in the world.

The *telos* of participating in God's beauty folds back upon the church by the Spirit, drawing creation into the triune life, opening eyes to the mystery of God's presence that already fills creation, and empowering the people of God to live into that mystery. As such, we are drawn into the triune mystery that is here, and therefore visible, while at the same time beyond, and therefore invisible. Poetics, Performance, and Practices, when aligned with a vision of God's beauty, provide pathways to enter into this emanating and remanating work of the Spirit so that this vision of God's beauty can become a lived theology. The following examines each in turn.

The Poetics of Missional Church

A poetic script that aligns with the *Missio Dei* shapes the imagination for the performance of interactive improvisation. On the surface, the development of a script seems contradictory because improvisation, by definition, is a performance without a script. However, this poetry is paradoxically a scripted improvisation because it fits into the larger narrative of the Scriptures. Beneath the surface of the visible improvisation is a hidden narrative, that of the Scriptures, where events move "unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another,"⁴ unveiling God's creative revelation that only makes sense retrospectively. The grand story of God's working alongside Israel, in Christ, and through the church, provides the backdrop for all faithful improvisation. God's way of working, as with any great narrative, does not work according to overt, visible, mechanistic predictability, because the action of God is always an

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics* 9, trans. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 1452a1ff.

improvisational encounter with the other. We could say that the Bible operates like the five acts in a Shakespearean play. N.T. Wright proposes,

Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play, most of whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a remarkable wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearean actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves. . . .

[P]art of the initial task of the actors chosen to improvise the new final act will be to immerse themselves with full sympathy in the first four acts, but not so as merely to parrot what has already been said. They cannot go and look up the right answers. Nor can they simply imitate the kinds of things that their particular character did in the early acts. A good fifth act will show a proper final development, not merely a repetition, about the certain actions and speeches, about certain final moves in the drama, which will in one sense be self-authenticating, and in another gain authentication from their coherence with, there making sense of, the ‘authoritative’ previous text.”⁵

The authority of this script does not prescribe an exact language or set of patterns to repeat at this point in the play. At the same time, this improvisation is not a free for all that gives permission to the church to do whatever it wants in this fifth act because it only works if it is faithful to the story. The measurement of whether the improvisational script fits the story depends upon how it aligns with the climax of the cross. One cannot arbitrarily choose and apply scenes from that which comes before the climax without reading them through the climax. The play will only work if there is a thread that ties it

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 140-42.

together. The cross is that thread.⁶ Being true to the story line of the first four acts excludes any improvisation of a contradictory main plot. However, the main plot of God's mission that culminates on the cross is such that it can incorporate and even redeem all contradictory subplots.

The poetry of Act 5 that shapes the script will be written by the players via the power of the Spirit, not by the specialist. When all are considered as players, this means that the players are not required to improvise in the same way. Nor does it mean that the players (the laity) must mimic the improvisation of the clergy. The poetry will come in a variety of forms—words, art, actions, and many other options. It might be expressed in dance or mechanical engineering. The medium of this poetry could be food, games, play, or a monologue. It might come in an actual poem or a video recording. Or it might be expressed in a reflective time of guided prayer. The point is to give space for the unique voices to express Act 5. The question then for the church is What kind of poetic script of mission aligns with the beauty of the cross? Four options are explored below.⁷

Mission as Task

The most commonly-held view of mission is that it is something that humans, as the church or individuals, do. We evangelize, serve the poor, invest in the multiplication of the church, grow as disciples, engage our neighbors, and give our time and talents to

⁶ Gregory A. Boyd, *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

⁷ Note: the following is not an assessment of various scripts that aim to articulate the gospel message that is preached. The aim here is to name common imaginations about the nature of mission. In the four that follow, only the last aligns with the theology of God's triune emanation and remanation offered in chapter four. However, because systematic theology is so often disassociated from practical theology, it would be quite easy for someone to agree with the theological proposal offered in chapter four while adopting a poetic script of mission that is not consistent with it.

the things that we believe God cares about. Mission is viewed as a responsibility that operates according to this imagination: “Since God is missional so to the church *should* be missional.”

This mindset of mission generates an imagination where we conceive of participating in God’s mission as identifying the tasks of mission and getting involved in those tasks. As a result, the mission of God gets thrown back upon the church to pull off. For instance, Pastor University spoke about what she observed when she first became the rector, i.e. people with huge hearts and very active engaged in social justice issues, but the question of God’s presence in their efforts was not a part of the conversation. On the surface, their actions seemed to align Jesus’ commands to care for the poor but the Spirit’s leading in their specific context was not considered.

While the claim is made that church is missional in its ontology and that by focusing its energy around God’s mission, the reality is that the mission is not that of divine agency but of human agency. The church is participating in the promotion of the external results of mission—illustrated by the language of the five surface products of mission or something like being, doing and telling as introduced in chapter four—but it is not actually participating in the way that God is working beneath the surface to accomplish that mission.

Consider how mission as task works out in the history of Israel. First God is on mission in his relationship with Israel so that his chosen people might be a light to the nations. Israel is to be God’s set-apart people (holy) who demonstrate to the world what it means to be in relationship and in partnership with God. However, the Old Testament story reveals how Israel fell short of living out this call to be God’s missional light.

With the coming of Christ, we have the fulfillment of mission, as Jesus obeyed the Father in all things and demonstrated what it means to be in partnership with Father in mission. The Christ event is highlighted as the ultimate mission example, which Israel failed to fulfill.

After Christ, those who are committed to Christ preach Christ as the fullness of God and as the offering of salvation. This preaching or teaching is an event which calls people to follow Christ and participate in God's mission. This event is a mission command to place energy and effort into the production of mission as the mission of God should determine the life purpose of those are committed to following Jesus. The command could be summarized in this way, "Just as God commanded the Israelites to be on mission, and just as Jesus actually set the model for what it means to fulfill that command, so the church is to obey that command."

In response to this event of the mission command, the church has before it two options, obey or disobey. It can either be inwardly focused and ignore "the world" or it can be externally focused and go forth into the world and share the gospel. This is a subsequent event in the life of the church that is distinct from the previous three. The church is left alone before God with its decision of whether or not it will choose to obey, thereby making the five surface products of mission happen. However, this point of view throws mission back upon the church to pull off. Mission gets done to the extent that the church responds rightly to it. To adapt the words of James Torrance, "To reduce [mission] to this two-dimensional thing—God and ourselves, today—is to imply that God throws us back upon ourselves to make our response."⁸ In other words, the mission of

⁸ James Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 29-30.

God is a product of human response to God's command. God has done what God can do and now it is up to the church to do its part.⁹

This means that if the church is not being effective in its mission, there are four possible task-oriented questions that must be asked. The first is the question of whether the church has found the right set of tasks. If the chosen strategy is not working, then maybe someone else has a better "mousetrap." The second is the question of whether there is a misguided or missing task within the chosen strategy; therefore, if the church just modifies the strategy slightly, the mission will work. Third, there is the question of commitment. Within the task mindset, if the group is not committed to the new tasks, then it will not work. And fourth, there is the question of alignment. Is the group of people aligned in such a way that they can perform the tasks?

This imagination about the mission of God means that the church is trying to replicate the missional action of God as depicted by the example of Christ. It is participation in "*missio*" not participation in "*missio Dei*." We are committed to God's good works but not to entering into participating in and partnering with God. As a result, the church in its response of mission obedience actually takes its cue of what it means to be a missional church from the Old Testament narrative as opposed to the mission fulfillment of Christ. Mission is a command to be obeyed in line with the commands of God which depends upon the church's proper response. Therefore, the church ignores the

⁹ One way this script gets written looks like this: God is triune and therefore social in nature. Since this is who God is and this is how God works in the world, the mission of God today gets carried out socially, as opposed to individualistically. Therefore, the church will be missional to the degree that it is living in community. With this mindset, the church invests its energy in the task of developing forms for people to live in community. On the surface, this line of thinking seems to hit the bullseye. Since God is Triune, to participate in God's mission means that the church will be social. However, this treats the Trinity as an event that we as the church now try to replicate.

negative object lesson of the Old Testament and takes upon itself to do what Israel could not.

Mission as Antagonism

Mission as Task has a sister script called Mission as Antagonism, which shapes mission around that which it stands against. As a result, the language of this script shifts from “should” to “must.” There is an anxiety and frustration that comes with those who write this script: “Since God is missional, so too the church *must* be missional.”

This script most often sets up an enemy that is to be deconstructed, one that often is labeled as the attractional church, the program-based church, the traditional church, the pagan church, or the Constantinian church. It is inherently antagonistic, promoting a version of church that is not traditional, and therefore making the mission of God about *not* being “that kind of church” rather than promoting church that lives into a constructive view of God’s activity in the world. This taps into the pain and frustration people have experienced in the traditional expressions of the church. Ministry burnout, leadership manipulation, and religious judgment have fostered an environment where committed church attendees are fed up with the church that they know. Like a consumer who has a poor experience at a department store, they have a felt-need for an alternate experience. As a result, it becomes a new form of the attractional church that taps into a different felt-need of the audience.

The labels used to deconstruct the church act as empty signifiers. For instance, rhetoric is used to attack the Constantinian model of church where people sit and observe professionals who do church for them. They deconstruct hierarchy and the promotion of spiritual leaders. They attack the laziness of the laity and the lack of discipleship.

However, they fail to see that their rhetoric acts in such a way that actually plays into the hands of this empty signifier. By attacking what they are against, they set themselves up as the new heroes, the new priesthood, of the church.

Another empty signifier goes by the label “the New Testament church.” The antagonism is always couched in a claim that what they are attacking is not befitting of the New Testament, while the ideals and dreams that they are promoting unveil the secret insights in what it means to be God’s kind of church. Such ideals serve as empty signifiers because they inherently lack concrete meaning on two levels. First, if the success of the church is dependent upon any one secret, then why does not the New Testament articulate that secret as plainly as these antagonizers claim? Second, if we were to compile a list of the secrets to being a New Testament church that has been promoted over the last 20 years, we would fill up a small library. No one actually knows what it means to be a New Testament church because we have been spouting this rhetoric so much that we do not actually expect it to manifest in reality. However, it sells books, and it provides short-term hope for those who care about the church.

Mission as antagonism is what Jacques Ellul describes as revolt without revolution. Revolt alone is a reaction to the established powers because those being oppressed by those powers feel like they have no other option. Like a cornered, scared animal, the only option left is lashing out. However, a revolt alone does not lead to long-term change because the establishment remains in control. Revolt is the visceral reaction that plays off people’s desperation, while revolution moves beyond into the construction of a new imagination.¹⁰

¹⁰ “[W]e must think about revolution before making it; at least we now realize that today’s revolution is not a manifest necessity: it does not rise from a sudden rebellious impulse and is no longer an

However, the cycle of revolt continues because of the search for what Žižek calls *jouissance*, that perverse enjoyment one gets at the demise of the enemy, that yearning to see that which we are against fail so that the ideals that we are promoting might be viewed as successful. Real change is not necessary as long as that which one stands against does not actually succeed.

Mission as Gift

Mission as gift is an alternative script that proclaims, “Since God is missional, the church *is* also missional.” Whereas mission as task operates from a contractual mindset where God does his part and the church does its part—which depends upon finding the right task, done in the right way, with the right effort, and the right alignment—mission as gift operates from a trinitarian mindset where God is the active agent who fulfills not only the divine commitments but also he fulfills the divine commandments in the stead of humanity. In Christ, the Son has offered a faithful response to the Father as our representative, and thereby includes humanity in that response as being “in Christ.” This not only includes the human stance before God as loved and enraptured in the divine/Triune life (what some call *theosis*), but it also includes the participation in the triune life of mission. Just as the people of God are brought into the divine life by grace, so also the people of God are part of the mission of God by grace.

The cross is the center, the culmination, and the climax of the divine revelation.

The story line that leads up to the cross is to be interpreted through the cross and the

overwhelming human need. Necessary revolution can result only from careful preparation, conscious awareness, and determined efforts. Today there is no urgent revolutionary imperative. Revolution can be experienced as a necessity only by habitual ascetics and those who have exercised extreme self-discipline—failing that, ‘revolutionary’ action is merely the result of propaganda or simply ‘action,’ and not revolutionary at all,” Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 267.

events which develop after the cross rolls forward by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, like a work of literature which has a series of ascending points of conflict that lead to the climax, the Old Testament recounts a series of rising conflicts that prepare the way of the full revelation of God in Christ. With this in mind, the mission commands of the Old Testament operate as a series of negative object lessons. The call for Israel to be a light to the nations is a command that demonstrates how no nation can actually faithfully fulfill this command. The law, the monarchy, polygamy, and even violence are depicted on the surface as direct commands in the Old Testament, but when read through the lens of Christ—and more specifically the lens of the cross—it becomes clear that they are actually concessions or accommodations of God so that he might be in relationship with people who did not fully understand who he is and how he works. As such, the concessions serve as negative object lessons to prepare God's people for the ultimate fulfillment in Christ. In a similar way, the same could be said about the commands for Israel to be on mission. When looking back upon them from the perspective of Christ, they serve as negative object lessons to teach us how mission as task cannot be fulfilled through human effort but instead prepares the people of God to receive the only one who can actually fulfill God's mission.¹¹ It is not so much that God's first or preferred way of mission was to choose a specific nation in the way that he did with Abraham and his descendants, but the way God worked with Israel was a result of his covenant partners' inability to walk with him in his ways to be faithful mission participants. To summarize the conclusion succinctly, the idea of a nation that operates like the nations of the world—according to the patterns of law, kingship, and war—being a faithful mission

¹¹ Boyd, *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence*, 83-99.

agent to the world was a project that could not work because it did not align with God's aim for what it means to be God's people.

In the stead of Israel, comes the true Israel, the faithful mission partner, Jesus Christ, the one who fully loved the Father in the way that Israel was called to do. Jesus provided the faithful response to the commands of the Father in the place of Israel and of all humanity. Jesus performed the mission by faith, which sin had undermined the capacity of all others to perform, no matter their efforts and commitments.

In the light of this, the work that comes after Christ's faithful response on the cross is not that of command for the church to fulfill the task of mission. Instead, "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Mission occurs in Christ, through the power of the Spirit. Mission is gift that the church receives, not work that the church accomplishes. Through the once and for all death and resurrection of Christ where the entire faithful response has been offered to the Father, the church now participates in that faithful response, where all that is now offered by the church as mission is drawn up into Christ's response and Christ's response is made manifest in those who submit to Christ. James Torrance writes, "Our intercession and mission to the world, are they not the gift of participating in the intercession and mission of the 'apostle and high priest whom we confess' (Heb 3:1)." ¹²

Alan Torrance argues, "The event of grace does not stop where the free human response begins; it includes precisely the human response to the extent that the human response is completed on our behalf in Christ. Grace relates not only to the anhypostatic

¹² Torrance, 21.

movement, but to the enhypostatic movement as well.”¹³ This is another way of making Jonathan Edwards’ point about the emanation and the remanation of God and how the people of God are included in the missional movement of God. Alan Torrance continues, “This desire is given *en Christo* as we are brought to participate in his human life and live ‘out of’ the vicarious worship [and mission] . . . provided in him by the Spirit on our behalf—and where we are thereby recreated to live out of this event of grace in all its objectivity.”¹⁴ This script keeps Christ and his work on the cross at the center, as the one who fulfills the Father’s mission in the world. Just as Christ is the gift given to the world who obeys the Father in every way, so too Christ is given to the world to complete the mission in the place of humanity who cannot fulfill that mission. Mission is gift.

Mission as Desire¹⁵

Mission as Desire proclaims, “Since God’s is missional, God evokes a missional church.” This view builds on Mission as Gift and if it were understood rightly, the specific naming of Mission as Desire would not be required. However, the previous script can be too easily misperceived in two ways. First, because the argument for Mission as Gift arises out of the Reformed stream of thought, some might conclude that the mission of God is merely a fulfillment of God’s blueprint-like control of the other. This would mean that the way that the church participates in mission is merely God’s pre-ordained

¹³ Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 318-19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁵ Crucial to communicating this form of poetry is testimonies of groups of people who have participated in God’s mission through creative expressions that tap into desire. See Michael Moynagh, *Being Church Doing Life: Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens* (Oxford, U.K.: Monarch Books, 2014).

control so that all things can be accomplished according to his mysterious will. While it is beyond the parameters of this thesis to enter into this argument, it will suffice to say that we need not think of God's work of mission and the reality of human choice as working in opposition to one another. The mission of God can remain the *missio Dei* whereby God is the agent at work, while at the same time the people of God are choosing to participate in that agency. The poetic form of the story of God need not be limited to the bi-polar option of one or the other where we are forced to choose between either God controlling all things in order to accomplish his mission or that the mission of God depends upon the free choices of humans. Instead, the Poetics of mission operate according to the imagination, not according to isolated theological logic. The Poetics cannot be viewed rightly in isolation from Practices and Performance. We might say that the works of Shakespeare cannot be rightly perceived in the classroom. They are made for the stage and can only be rightly known as they are experienced through Practice and Performance. Therefore, to conclude that the mission of God is a matter of either God's control or human effort is foreign to the way that God revealed the *missio Dei* through the cross.

Therefore, the resolution of the story of the cross as it is lived out by the church who enters into the wake of the work of the cross by the Spirit is the dynamic of the church discovering itself being drawn into the story of God's mission by faith. This is not the faith we have in Christ that saves us, but a faith that we are given in the faithfulness of Christ. It is trusting in the trustworthiness of God through Jesus's completed vicarious response to the Father. Now the Son, as the high priest, worships, prays, loves, and serves the world in our stead and the Spirit draws us into this response of the Son before the Father. "The totality of the appropriate human response to God's unconditional, covenant

commitment to his people held forth in the Torah—may be seen to be completed in the Second Adam, the one true human, who thus ‘fulfills the law’ on our behalf.”¹⁶ We could argue the same point about mission. The totality of mission is completed in Christ, the one true missionary, who fulfills all the commands of mission on the behalf of the church. Therefore, the work of mission that the church does in the wake of the cross is not “good works” that are done as a command. They are “good works” that are already fulfilled on the cross through which the Spirit develops in us the desire, the capacity, and the power to enter.

This leads to a second way that Mission as Gift could be misappropriated. It could be argued that since the mission of God is completed in the gift of the faithful and complete fulfillment of Christ on the cross, then mission does not actually require a response from the church. Therefore, all that is needed is the declaration of the truth of the fulfillment. We do not worship because Christ is the high priest who leads the church in worship (Heb 9:11). We do not pray because the Spirit is our intercessor (Rom 8:26). We do not go forth on mission because God is at work in the world. Therefore, the pressure is off the church to the point that the mission of the church is viewed as simply receiving the unilateral gift of God.

With this view of the gift, mission actually ends up being another form of task. The gift is given to the extent that we have received the fulfillment of God, but now it is up to the church to declare that which has been done. And if there is room for action—and there always is because even the proclamation of the gift in preaching and other forms of communion is a “deed”—then the action falls back upon the church to pull off.

¹⁶ Torrance, 323.

Mission as gift only sees God's fulfillment of mission as a historical fact, but how this is an ongoing reality in the life of the church is left undeveloped. It is merely something that the church proclaims and practices through the Eucharist. Any other concrete manifestations of mission are derived from the task imagination.

The script of Mission as Desire is therefore an extension of Mission as Gift, as the gift of God is not merely unilateral, where God's salvation is offered to the recipient with no expectation of return.¹⁷ The cross is not a static one-way offering for the sake of the other, meaning that the only thing that the other can do is to accept the gift. John Milbank proposes that the gift as a form of gift exchange, although one that goes beyond a quid pro quo contract. It is not a gift exchange (akin to the task script) where God gives and the other reciprocates, each party doing their part. Instead the gift of God is that of infinite, ongoing giving (emanation) to such an extent that the living Giver is given to the other, thereby drawing the other into response. The church then can choose or resist participation by the Spirit in this response and the more the church enters into this work of the Spirit it will be formed to reflect the faithful response of the Son through the ongoing giving of the Giver (remanation).¹⁸

This speaks to the desire of the other to participate in mission. Whereas Mission as Task turns mission into duty, Mission as Antagonism makes it about frustration, and Mission as Gift can become a static reality, Mission as Desire makes space for the

¹⁷ John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given?," in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 119-61; *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 352-263.

¹⁸ Milbank writes, "Infinite giving, in order to be participated in, must be manifest for now in an aesthetic sense of who is to give, what, where and when, and what might be an appropriately shaped response or recompense in the case of something judged to be lacking," *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London: Routledge, 2003), 47.

passions, the *eros*, and the humanity of the other. In other words, mission embraces *eros* as the Giver gives to the point that the passions of the other—even passions that on the surface look repulsive—are gathered up into the life of God and they become a conduit for mission.

The imagination of Poetics of Mission as Desire is a script that corresponds with the beauty of the cross. The main plot of the cross shapes the primary story line that is improvised, while at the same time, it creates space for an infinite number of subplots that can be incorporated into and redeemed by the work of the Spirit. These subplots are expressed as desires of the players—most often desires that are tainted by misguided or even antithetical perceptions of God’s beauty—but through the movement of the main plot these desires are drawn into God’s mission and transformed.

The Performance of Missional Church

The revelation of *imago Dei* is made manifest in the *crucis Dei* as the cross is the ultimate unveiling of the beauty of God, as argued in chapter four. When God performs the *missio Dei* in Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, he does so according to the character of his being, his *imago Dei*. The coming of God in Christ is not merely an unexpected revelation, it is beauty that is manifest beneath the surface, incognito, or as Newbigin put it, “veiled form.” He wrote,

But his presence was veiled presence in order that there might be the possibility of repentance and freely given faith. In the Church, the mission of Jesus is continued in the same veiled form. It is continued through the presence and active working of the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of the reign of God in foretaste. The mission of the Church to all the nations, to all human communities in all their diversity and in all their particularity, is itself the mighty work of God, the sign of the inbreaking of the kingdom. The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission. It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ. When they are so drawn, they become

part of a community which claims no masterful control of history, but continues to bear witness to the real meaning and goal of history by a life which—in Paul's words—by always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus becomes the place where the risen life of Jesus is made available for others (2 Cor. 4:10).¹⁹

The church as “veiled form” correlates with beauty as the “invisible in the visible,” or seeing through the veneer of the cross to perceive the beauty that lies beneath the surface. However, such a perspective stands in contrast to images of church success and triumphalism that aim at overt “masterful control of history.” In most cases, mission gets turned into another way to build good churches, thereby limiting that which is attractive or beautiful about a church to cosmetics. In chapter four, the language typically associated with the characteristics of mission were introduced: the visible, overt, direct, and surface manifestations that include evangelism, new Christian discipleship, caring for the poor, addressing social injustice, and creation care. The missional church, supposedly, then is one that makes these things happen. While these are important, the cross demonstrates how visible manifestations of mission are performed through the invisible “veiled form” that occurs beneath the surface.

At this point, we must ask “What does the performance of a missional church look like in such a veiled form?” This is where Boyd’s proposal regarding the climax of the cross as a hermeneutic for interpreting the revelation of God in the Old Testament can be employed to interpret the mission of God subsequent to the cross. Boyd argues that the character of God displayed through performance of the mission of God on the cross is defined by four principles, all of which were summarized in chapter four. In an unpublished draft of *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, Boyd developed a fifth principle, the Principle of Responsible Identification, which was deleted from the published

¹⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 118-19.

version.²⁰ Boyd argues in this fifth principle that the cross is a revelation of God's character which manifests how God takes responsibility for the sins of humanity. The principle reads, "Though God is never culpable for sin and evil, he nevertheless assumes responsibility for it by fully identifying with those fallen free agents who are in fact culpable for it."²¹ On the cross, God enters into complete solidarity with God's "other" who are "in Adam," and God takes on full responsibility for sin and death by becoming what God is not. God identifies with and takes responsibility for the antithesis of God, demonstrating that divine beauty is such that God will take on the repulsive of the other to such an extent that God allows the surface perception of God to be misunderstood because of God's association with sin. Thereby the beauty of God is found in God's willingness not only to be associated with but also to be identified by the repulsive.

This fifth Principle is helpful in working out the patterns of Performance that are informed by the Cruciform Thesis for the church and *missio Dei* as viewed through theological aesthetics. More specifically, the Principle of Responsible Identification correlates with the missional pattern which I am calling Taking Hold of the Real. The five patterns of performance that fit as a part of Act 5 of the script are:

- Pattern 1: Being With as Two or Three which corresponds with Boyd's Principle of Cruciform Accommodation
- Pattern 2: Taking Hold of the Real which corresponds with Boyd's Principle of Responsible Identification
- Pattern 3: Priestly Prayer which corresponds with Boyd's Principle of Cosmic Conflict

²⁰ In a personal email, Boyd explains, "I deleted [this Principle] because it was thematically very close to the Principle of Cruciform Accommodation and because the material I used to support it was the same as the material I use to support the Principle of Redemptive Withdrawal. It thus felt quite redundant." Email dated, July 31, 2017.

²¹ Gregory A. Boyd, "Unpublished Draft of Crucifixion of the Warrior God," (Unpublished manuscript, 2017), Microsoft Word file.

- Pattern 4: Nonviolent Action which corresponds with Boyd’s Principle of Redemptive Withdrawal
- Pattern 5: Gifted Co-Creation which corresponds with Boyd’s Principle of Semiautonomous Power

The patterns of performance that correspond with the performance of the cross empower a congregation to address the repulsive political patterns that undermine mission. The following explores the implications of these five patterns for the Performance of the church.

Pattern #1: Being With as Two or Three

The performance of mission is commonly viewed as something intentional done by a group of “insiders” for the sake of “outsiders,” based on an imagined division of church life into two broad categories. The first includes what a church performs for the insiders, including activities like worship, prayer, and the teaching ministry that promotes *Communion* with God, along with fellowship, small groups, and conflict resolution that promotes healthy *Relating* in community. The second category includes what a church does for outsiders— *Engagement* with the context—which includes evangelism, new believer discipleship, caring for the needy, social justice issues, and creation care. We might illustrate it this way:

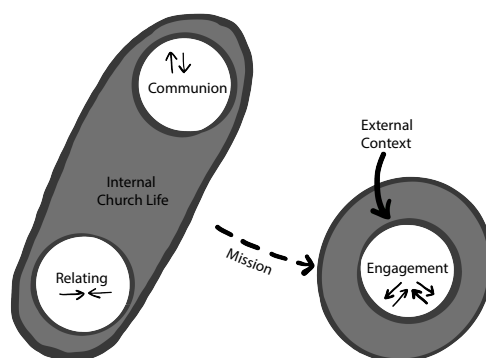


Figure 26: Internal Versus External

The activities that we do internally are about “church.” External activities are classified as “mission.” Participating in *missio Dei* then is about one group developing internal ministry and then acting for the world externally. Mission then is not integral to the ontology of the church, but a second level action.

If, however, the mission is viewed through the lens of beauty, the dichotomy of interior versus exterior is collapsed. God’s beauty which overflows in mission cannot be separated from God’s inner life because God deliberately chooses to turn to the world in love because “God is love.” Just as the cross is ultimate to God’s being, not derivative, because the cross is the ultimate definition of divine love, so too the cross is the defining climax of the missional ontology of the church. The cruciform beauty of God overflows to the world, which means that God’s beauty emanates toward the church and through the church. There are two steps required to embrace this ontology of being with the other as an expression of the cross.

The first step is taken when the church embarks upon mission as a community, a phenomenon that Eastern Orthodox theologians have called this “communion-in-mission,”²² which can also be expressed as “community-in-mission.” The triune God is on mission as a communion of Father-Son-Spirit, and therefore the church is sent on mission in the form of community that lives in this communion. Michael Moynagh writes, “If the church is communion-in-mission, then—as a normal expression—the mission of the local church should be undertaken in communion.”²³ *Missio Dei* is not then

²² Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, 294.

²³ Michael Moynagh, *Church in Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 143.

performed as individuals are sent out from the gathered church, but the church is sent as a community-in-mission.

The pattern of “two or three” is essential to this first step. In contrast to the common image where the gathered church is the place of communion and community, and the mission is carried out by individuals outside the bounds of those relationships, the biblical pattern of mission is to send out living parables of communion-in-mission in the context of the world—whether neighborhoods, workplaces, leisure activities, or third places. Jesus sent out the twelve and the seventy in pairs (Luke 10:1-12). He taught that where two or three are gathered in his name that his presence would be with them (Matthew 18:20). Peter and John went to the Temple to pray together (Acts 3:1). The leaders of the missionary journeys in Acts worked in teams—Barnabus and Paul, Paul and Silas, Paul and Timothy, Barnabus and Mark—not because they aimed to be effective, but because the two or three performing the life of God demonstrates the life of the gospel to that those who are not part of God’s kingdom. The “two or three” set the environment for interactive improvisation and then they draw others into it.²⁴

The second step is taken when the church realizes that the way that a church communes with God is just as missional as any act of evangelism, and the way that the

²⁴ This idea relates to a proposal of John Howard Yoder that he calls “migration evangelism,” which he specifically develops for international missions. However, the idea can be adapted for the local setting in Western contexts. Instead of sending out professional individuals, he suggests that groups of Christians move into new contexts to practice the faith while they get jobs and become integrated in the local context. He writes, “The purpose of migration evangelism would not be for Christians, or for representatives of one denomination, to save their life as a group, identifiable by a particular language, a particular set of family names, or particular cultural patterns. Rather they would expect to lose their identity and perhaps even their names in the birth of first-generation Christian fellowships or in the revitalization of existing fellowship in the lands to which they go,” John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 409. Hauerwas makes a similar point, “Two, at the very least, have to travel together because otherwise those to whom they go would not be able to ‘see’ the gospel. For the gospel is just that—a seeing of a communion between people that the world cannot otherwise know,” Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 180.

members serve each other are equally missional as any social justice program. God's beauty emanates through the way the church loves God, loves with one another, and engages their context. Being missional involves the integration of Communion, Relating, and Engagement. All three are missional because all three are involved in the way the beauty of God emanates toward creation.²⁵ The following Venn diagram demonstrates the overlapping and integrated nature of the life of mission.

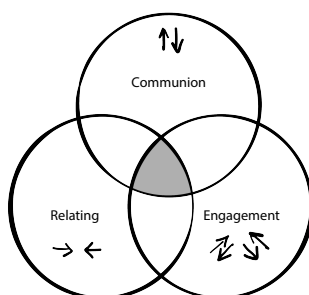


Figure 27: Integrated Mission

The *imago Dei* of God's "more than necessary" beauty emanates *ad extra* as *missio Dei* with creation out of the source of God's *ad intra* nature of being with as Father-Son-Spirit. This is illustrated in the above diagram as the center point where three circles overlap to form the same image used to depict the triune image of God in chapter four. God is constantly "witnessing" to the beauty that God is in the way that God draws the church into God's life of communion, in God's life of relating to the "other," and into God's dialogical engagement with that which stands against God, because this effusive beauty is a witness in and of itself. All three are ways that God's people participate in God's life and thus all express God's inundating mission. Thus Communion, Relating,

²⁵ I write about this elsewhere. See M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 63-64.

and Engagement are pure gift, excessive love, and unending life that flow out of God's triune beauty.

In this way, the church is with the world, as the prayers and the loving of each other reveal God just as much as anything that the church might do for those outside the church. Let me illustrate: If you were a resident in first-century Ephesus, you would be a part of a small city that was about four miles long and a mile wide with about 300,000 people. Houses are built right next to one another, and streets are narrow. There is no glass on the windows and neighbors know one another well. A man named Paul and his companions arrive and they visit the logical synagogue. Paul teaches and miracles occur. Then a riot flares up because an idol maker is losing business due to people turning to Paul's teaching about Christ. It is impossible for you or others who live in that part of the city to not know what is going on. While the group that gathers with Paul might do things that aim at public proclamation, you and others in the neighborhood can see how they treat each other, that is how they are sacrificing for one another. In addition, their worship, their prayers, and even Paul's teaching can be heard by passersby, and the way that they relate to each other is visible to all who take an interest.²⁶

This might be conceived as being the church "before a watching world," where church does its thing apart from the context in which it lives, serving as another form of the attractional church. The inner life of the church is performed but not in a way that the world can see it because the church is parallel to the world, not performing *missio Dei* in

²⁶ Rita Finger observes, "Many neighbors would have overheard activity around a communal meal in a small room or an open courtyard that was characterized by great joy (singing? laughter?). In the midst of the urban chaos and misery that characterized every ancient Mediterranean city, such a gathering must have sounded inviting indeed." Reta Halteman Finger, *Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 242.

a way that engages the world so that the world can see its distinctive life. An alternative to “before” is “with the watching world.” This little-known passage from Newbigin illustrates being with as a lived theology:

In hundreds of villages where the congregation is too poor to build a church, worship takes place in the street or in the shade of a tree. One administers the sacraments and preaching the word to a group of believers surrounded by a wider circle of those who do not yet believe, but for whom also Christ came. One speaks to all, and the words spoken to the Church are heard by those outside. And the Church grows, because those who come merely to listen or even to scoff, stay to learn more and finally take the step forward to join the group in the middle. One sees the Church then as something living and moving, as the visible form of the action of the Holy Spirit in drawing men and all kinds to Christ. Just because of the absence of a protecting wall, the Church can sometimes be saved from thinking of itself as a society which exists for its members: it is reminded that it exists because Christ died for all and seeks all. Here the words ‘come’ and ‘go’ are both heard. I have very often found in my visits to these village congregations that the men and women who were baptized on one visit are, on the next, the ones who are standing as sponsors for others. They have taken it for granted that the first thing a new Christian does is to go and tell others. Thus the Church grows spontaneously. It is itself the mission, the embassy’s age of Christ sent to all men in his name, going in order to bid men come, coming in order to be sent, a gathering and a sending which is for all men.”²⁷

The two examples that I have included here—one from the New Testament era and the other from a poor village in India—both illustrate pre-Constantinian performances of church life. They are not ideal performances, as if a church set in a third-ring suburb in north Dallas, for instance, will be able to replicate them. We face contextual challenges that are shaped by life patterns, modern architecture, and neighborhood planning. Our church buildings are such that the outsiders cannot observe what is transpiring from the outside without entering through a set of doors. The same is true of our houses. If one meets in a so-called “missional community,” neighbors can only see that there are cars parked in the street once a week. The way that the community

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1966), 108-09.

prays together and loves one another is not publicly performed. Therefore, any external engagement must be planned, or the pressure is put on individuals to go forth and be missionaries on their own. As a result, even a missional community becomes a new form of attractional church life.

Community-in-mission performs God's beauty in context so that the world can observe God in action. Practical ways that community-in-mission (or missional communities as two of my interviewees call them) has manifested was not explored. However, the imagination about missional church was communicated in such a way that it removed the pressure from individuals to make missional happen as individual missionaries but instead God's missional beauty is manifest and experienced through community.²⁸ Being with God and being with the other is about relationships. The church will participate in *missio Dei* to the degree that it lives in love. Mission and relationships are two sides of the same coin.²⁹ God's mission is inherently relational because "God is love."

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards writes, "One alone, without any reference to any more, cannot be excellent; for in such a case there can be no manner of relation no way, and therefore no such thing as consent. . . . The highest excellency, therefore, must be the consent of spirits one to another. But the consent of spirits consists half in their mutual love one to another, and the sweet harmony between the various parts of the universe is only an image of mutual love" Edwards, "The Mind," 337-38.

²⁹ I explore this point more thoroughly in M. Scott Boren, *Grouping Your Church in the Way of Jesus: A Guidebook for Community & Mission* (St. Paul: The Center for Community & Mission, 2017); *The Relational Way: From Small Group Structures to Holistic Life Connections* (Houston, TX: TOUCH Publications, 2007).

Pattern #2: Taking Hold of the Real³⁰

“God’s truth became flesh in the world and is alive in the real.”³¹ Because the cross is the demonstration of God’s identification with the most repulsive of humanity, as Jesus entered into the worst of the worst of the culture of his day, becoming a cursed criminal in the eyes of that culture, we see a God who reveals his character and is at work in the real world from the inside of that reality. Jesus entered into, and continues by the Spirit to move into, the depth of that which God is not in order to draw the other into that which God is. God does not come alongside reality to offer an alternative way. God enters into the repulsive to develop an alternative out of the repulsive, as the seedbed of sin and rebellion is the context out of which God’s beauty arises.

If God is in fact infinite beauty, then that which is repulsive—no matter how horrid it might be—cannot stand against it. Because the repulsive is a result of rebellion against beauty, then it cannot, by nature, possess an infinite ontology that stands against beauty on equal footing. Divine beauty and demonic ugliness are not two ways of being that operate on equal grounding. The ash heap of sin, while it might seem endless in our war-torn world, has a beginning, while the beauty of God does not. The beauty of God enters into and overcomes the repulsive, just as light and darkness do not work in tandem

³⁰ This section title is taken from Barry Harvey, *Taking Hold of the Real: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Profound Worldliness of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015). In it he writes, “[T]he church intrudes on godless and banal conceptions of worldliness by participating in, and bearing witness to, the uniting of the reality of God and the reality of the world in Jesus Christ” (22).

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, 1st English-language ed., Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 605.

to one another. Instead light invades the darkness and, by definition, the light transforms the space where there is darkness.³²

Therefore, the church can confidently engage the repulsive. Bonhoeffer writes, “In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other.”³³ The church is not a theater which is complete in and of itself in order to perform the gospel over and against the reality of the context as an exclusive community. Nor is the church like an open-air stage where any and all can see what the gospel means apart from reality. Just as the cross was performed on the stage of the world, not in the temple or in some kind of innovative religious form, the stage on which the *missio Dei* is performed is the stage of the world. Barry Harvey comments about Bonhoeffer’s argument, “The world as such is the stage on which two distinct productions are being presented. The church performs what Bonhoeffer calls the polyphony of life in the midst of a world come of age, which is also a social performance that is orchestrated by ‘technological organization of all kinds.’”³⁴ The “world come of age” is Bonhoeffer’s metaphor for the modernistic, secular public arena that has learned how to operate as if God does not exist. The gospel and the church intersect the reality of this context, and as such, discover the way that God is at work in an age where we have

³² This is the reason that missional church as an exclusive community that operates parallel to a local context fails to capture the imagination of what it means to participate in God’s mission. If the goal of the missional church is to operate as some kind of idyllic kingdom community that serves as an icon of God alongside the repulsive of the world, thereby offering people a choice to enter into alternative way that is pulled out of a local context, then we fall short of the mission of God as defined by the cross.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 34.

³⁴ Harvey, 22.

learned to live without God. Lesslie Newbigin developed his thinking of this intersection as a three-cornered relationship that could be depicted in this way.³⁵

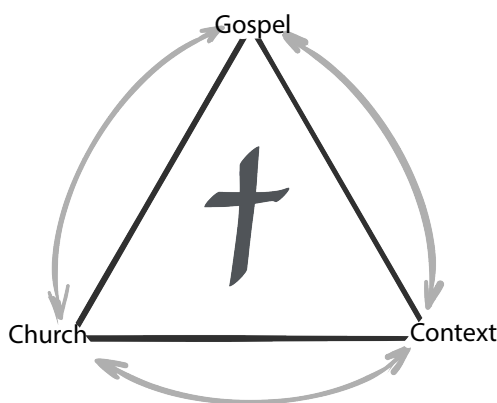


Figure 28: Gospel-Context-Church

The three corners do not operate as independent entities. Nor can any corner claim priority of God's presence over the other two. God is present in the real and the way that we perceive God's presence is by entering into the three-part conversation.³⁶ This means, for instance, that the gospel is not a pristine, culture-free ideal to be repeated but one that is to be performed in the local in such a way that the gospel and church can develop as a living reality that is appropriate to that context,³⁷ thereby being embodied as a "formed reality" of beauty that redeems the repulsive of the local. The same goes for the church.

³⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 174-82. Newbigin's three corners are explicated in George R. Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America," in *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3-25.

³⁶ *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 235-79.

³⁷ See Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985). He writes, "It takes the dynamic interaction of all three of these roots—gospel, church, culture—with all they entail about identity and change, to have the makings of local theology" (21).

The “formed reality” of the church is discovered within the local. It is not prescribed as an ideal.

Listening is crucial to performing this pattern of taking hold of the real. The purpose of listening is to become aware of what is not obvious on the surface, to see what is really going on and what God is saying about it. We listen at all three corners of the triangle and seek God’s gift of discernment. The ideological analysis of Žižek provides tools to listen and therefore perceive the reality of what is ugly and repulsive in both the context and in the church. Instead of merely accepting the patterns of context and church as “the way things are” they can be perceived as ugly, systematic public truths that form our habits and practices and therefore shape our character. If we only describe them as “the way things are,” then they possess power to define political patterns. Instead, ideological analysis gives the power to name the way things are that should not be so, thereby deconstructing their power. Ideological analysis does not attack the repulsive directly because this would actually perpetuate the repulsive by becoming antagonistic against the antagonistic. Similar to trying to end violence with violence, it would reinforce the problem, continuing the never-ending negation of the negation through judgment of judgment. As a result, the church focuses not on God’s action to enter into the real, but on standing at arm’s length from the real, serving as a judge and critic of the ugly.

To take hold of the real is to put the “real” under the microscope through contextual exegesis and then bring that into conversation with the beauty of the cross. One of the most significant voices of the real is the French sociologist and lay theologian Jacques Ellul. Using the sociological tools in a similar—yet more constructive—way to

Žižek, he sought to help the church develop a deep understanding of the reality of life so that we might be able to perceive the repulsive where God is at work. For instance, in his analysis of the technological nature of our context, he writes:

The problem is that the accumulation of means and the increase of technology can only serve, as we now see, to glorify man before God . . . Our world is driven by the spirit of conquest. This is its only spirit. In consequence it has heaped up means in the form of technology. A simplistic view lets us think that the more man acquires knowledge, power, dominion, and consumer good, the freer he will be. The more he has, the more he will be. The more means he has at his disposal, the greater will be his freedom. Our present society, however, is in the process of learning the direct opposite. The more the means of action increase, the more man's inner and outer freedom diminishes. As technology becomes more rigorous, freedom is increasingly buried under the accumulation of means.³⁸

The church takes hold of the real as it seeks to perform *missio Dei* as, “little missions”³⁹ through the creation of open places where people can have free conversations about both the reality of the world and the reality of God at the same time.

Pattern #3: Priestly Prayer

The church is only on mission with the God revealed on the cross to the degree that it enters into the distinctive pattern of prayer before God. Balthasar wrote, “We do not build the kingdom of God on earth by our own efforts (however assisted by grace), the most we can do, through genuine prayer, is to make as much room as possible, in ourselves and in the world, for the kingdom of God, so that its energies can go to

³⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 269.

³⁹ Clemens Sedmak uses the language of “little theologies” to capture this point. By “theology” he is not speaking of the theoretical abstractions, but of the ways that God’s truth is expressed and lived creatively in a local setting. He writes, “Little theologies arise in concrete occasions and in response to specific needs; they are often evoked by simple questions. As personal answers to personal questions and particular reactions to local concerns, little theologies are developed face to face with people without using ‘canned’ answers. Constructing little theologies requires the ability to listen and learn. Articulating them requires both sensitivity to the realities of the concrete situation and basic knowledge of the gospel,” Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 130.

work.”⁴⁰ Mission is not rooted in action; it is rooted in God, and being that God is revealed in the hidden work of the cross where one can only perceive what God is doing by looking beneath the surface, what God is doing and wants to do⁴¹ on mission in the world can only be perceived if the church has the eyes to see and ears to hear what emerges through prayer.

Just as the Son lives in union with the Father by the Spirit—what the Church Fathers referred to this as “one in being” (homoousios) with the Father—we now communicate or participate in this “one in being” through open communication that the Son has with the Father. James Torrance writes, “[T]o participate by the Spirit in the incarnate Christ’s communion with the Father is to participate in the eternal Son’s communion—a relationship which is both internal to the Godhead and externally extended to us by grace.”⁴² What has the church to give to the world if God’s people do not live in distinct communion with the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit?

Yet our view of reality which has been shaped by “the secular age”⁴³ of our context has trained us to live as if God is not present, as if the presence of the divine has been cut off from experience in the world, and thus man is put at the center. Jacques Ellul writes,

[T]he deep-seated tendency now is really to place man at the center of everything. In insisting that man must himself perform that which he petitions, we no longer

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 105.

⁴¹ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, 59-60.

⁴² Torrance, 32.

⁴³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

are saying that he should become involved in it, but that is in fact responsible for fulfilling the prayer himself. The answer no longer depends upon someone outside who acts *proprio motu*, but upon what I myself shall do. This activity takes precedence over the prayer itself, which has now become the program for my own action.⁴⁴

When humans put themselves at the center, prayer is not needed and the human agents take action that ends up being a subtle form of violence by imposing preconceived expectations upon others, thereby cutting off an experience of God's beauty. In the name of good intentions or "obedience to the Word," the church projects its own agenda on those who are outside the church. Ellul writes, "Apart from prayer, action is necessarily violence and falsehood. . . . Prayer is the only possible substitute for violence in human relations."⁴⁵ The church does not know what actions to take nor even the strategy for action without communion with the one who is acting. If a local church fails to pray, it acts directly offering only what it possesses to the other, and while that action might improve circumstances, it is only a linear progression of what already is known. It fails to offer what can only come through revelation of the Other who is at work in the world.⁴⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified the problem of direct action by contrasting self-centered love with spiritual love.

Self-centered love loves the other for the sake of itself; spiritual love loves the other for the sake of Christ. That is why self-centered love seeks direct contact with other persons. It loves them, not as free persons, but as those whom it binds

⁴⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁶ "Here the vertical event has unfolded into a series of times of salvation comparable to the acts of a play. This does not mean that the vertical event-time has been dissolved into a merely horizontal trim of successive saving facts, but it does mean that the vertical event-time overtakes and refashions horizontal time, using it so that the event may spread itself out into dramatic form. It is not as if there is only the fifth act, or even only the crucial scene of the *peripeteia*: God plays the whole piece right through with the individual human being and the human race," Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I: Prologomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 28.

to itself. It wants to do everything it can to win and conquer; it puts pressure on the other person. It desires to be irresistible, to dominate.⁴⁷

This is a form of secular spirituality where the people of God act as if God is not present, as if God is not at work, and as if the church must do the work of God for God. Mission then becomes a form of “athletic Christianity,” as Pastor University put it in our conversation. As an alternative, Bonhoeffer writes:

Spiritual love, however, comes from Jesus Christ; it serves him alone. It knows that it has no direct access to the other persons. Christ stands between me and others. I do not know in advance what love of others means on the basis of the general idea of love that grows out of my emotional desires.⁴⁸

The marks of mission become “general ideas of love,” items on a missional scorecard that demonstrates whether or not a church is actually doing mission. Yet the way that the church performs *missio Dei* is indirect, and this indirect performance of prayer is what actually produces these marks.

“This spiritual love will thus speak to Christ about the other . . . more than to the other . . . about Christ. It knows that the most direct way to others is always through prayer to Christ and that love of the other is completely tied to the truth found in Christ.”⁴⁹ The work of God in the world is a mystery as it extends beyond human understanding. The *missio Dei* is not found in Christians who work directly in ministry to others. That is *missio humanus*. We only participate in *missio Dei* when we enter into the reality of mystery at work in the space between.

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. Geoffrey B. Kelly, Daniel W. Bloesch, and James H. Burtneiss, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 42.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 44.

Pattern #4: Nonviolent Action

Missional action is important, but we must ask of the kind of action that corresponds with the revelation of the cross. Just as the action taken on the cross takes on a veiled form that redeems all creation in the most unexpected of ways, so too the action taken as the church participates in *missio Dei* will be expressed in the most unexpected of ways. While in past generations, mission has taken on direct expression—most often through overt words and deeds of witness—the reality of the context in which the church finds itself calls for indirect or nonviolent action. Here I want to propose a way of performing the nonviolent action which is derived from the act of an embrace described by Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace*.

The act of the embrace is a way of capturing Boyd's Principle of Redemptive Withdrawal, which he uses to describe God's wrath, as God withdraws his protective hand, allowing other forces to carry out destruction, which is attributed by biblical authors as God's wrath. For instance, one might say that this principle gives us language to understand what happens when people harden their hearts toward God's extended arms that offer the opportunity for an embrace, and then God gives them what they want. The rejection of the embrace—sin—carries with it its own punishment, or to use Volf's language, it carries with it its own exclusion. Rejecting God's embrace carries with it its own alienation because sin is self-alienating. God's withdraws, or is perceived as withdrawing by those consumed by the self-alienation of sin, as a paradoxical form of an embrace. God will not force the embrace, but waits for the other to be ready for it. The image of embrace has the ability to convey not only the way that God withdraws, but also

the nonviolent action of *missio Dei* by looking at the four actions of the what Volf calls the drama of embrace.

The first action is *opening the arms*. The cross demonstrates that God has his arms extended open to all. No one is excluded. “[O]pen arms are a sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other.”⁵⁰ This is the act of emanation, God extending himself to the other by making room in himself for the other. God is actively seeking to convey or communicate the reality of his open arms to those who cannot see that they are actually open. This is a “gesture of invitation.”⁵¹ The other is invited into the open space that God has created. It is not a gesture of force or even compulsion, but one of opportunity as it is seen, understood, and received, three parts that are directly associated with theological aesthetics. The first is about the ability of the other to “see” the open arms. The other has to perceive the extended arms for what they are. The nature of sin is such that it clouds the ability to perceive the extended arms of Jesus on the cross as open arms. Second, the other must understand what is seen. One might see the open arms while failing to interpret this act of God in a way that reflects what is actually true to its expression. In other words, the lie of the serpent in the Garden still applies because the words of God might be heard, but they get twisted. Third, the other has to receive the act of open arms for what it is. While the other might not be ready to respond to it, there is an opportunity to receive it before reciprocating.

⁵⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 141.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

Waiting is the second action. “Before it can proceed, it must wait for desire to arise in the other and for the arms of the other to open.”⁵² Waiting for the other and for God to work in the other is one of the most significant missional actions because “[t]he other cannot be coerced or manipulated into an embrace; violence is so much the opposite of embrace that it undoes the embrace.” In prayer, the Lord may have guided a specific action that is a concrete expression of extending the arms, however doing more is an act of force, which will actually hinder the desire for reciprocity in the other. “Waiting is a sign that, although the embrace may have a one-sidedness in its origin (the self makes the initial movement toward the other), it can never reach its goal without reciprocity (the other makes a movement toward the self).”⁵³ God does not force his action upon the world as if God predetermines those who will respond and those who will not. The *missio Dei* is an expression of God’s waiting for the other to see appropriately what his extended arms mean and then respond. The other will respond to the open arms according to what they perceive. If the other has images of God that are repulsive or experiences of the church that are less than favorable, the waiting of God will not be viewed according to the beauty that God is, but according to the imagination they possess about the open arms.

The waiting is the place where God’s withdrawal—what the Bible often identifies as God’s “wrath”—is experienced. Because God will not force his embrace upon the other, this is the place where people experience exclusion and alienation because their imagination is such that they do not have the ability to be shaken out of their own

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 143.

misperception. God, in his grace, allows wake-up calls, that come through the experience of God's withdrawal, as sin is allowed to do its work on itself. Or using the image of the distance from the embrace, the sin of living in exclusion or alienation takes its toll.

During this waiting, the one offering the embrace extends the arms not because they expect a response but because this is the way of the cross. This relates to what Douglas John Hall writes about waiting to "give a reason" (1 Peter 3:15), "Christians who are Christians intentionally and seriously must normally wait to be asked to 'explain themselves.'"⁵⁴ While Hall does not use the language of aesthetics, one could argue that asking to give a reason depends upon the beauty of the actions of the church. Hall writes, "[V]erbal testimony to the Christ is in any case futile unless the lives of those who testify have in some real way established the condition necessary to meaningful Christian apologia."⁵⁵ The effective communication of apologetics of the truth about God depends upon the apologetics of beauty that the church embodies.

The improvisation of a church's performance is only relevant if there is something about the improvisation that is distinctive. Words without actions that align with those words are pointless. They are empty and they might as well be left unsaid. We should wait to be asked. And if no one is asking, maybe the problem is not the state of the soul of the other. Maybe the problem is the fact that the church is not opening its arms in a way that piques curiosity.

Closing the arms is the third action. This is not an act that requires uniformity or full agreement between those who embrace. Even with a complete embrace—as in that

⁵⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 161.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

between husband and wife—there is no uniformity, no merger with the other or of the other with the self. There remains space between. The embrace is a place of acceptance of the real in the other. This in part is the acceptance of the differentiation of the other in the embrace. God does not expect us to be like him because we are not him. We are what we are and God fully accepts that. In part, it also means the acceptance of the repulsive in the other.

The closing of the arms can be concretely imagined through the extending and receiving of hospitality, the movement of the church from host to guest and from guest to host. God's hospitality is not unilateral; instead it evokes response. As a host, those on mission set a stage for conversations that draw the other into an experience that demonstrates God. As a guest, those on mission enter into the world of the other to see what God is doing in their lives. Being a host and a guest primarily involves the imagination because the goal is to be with the other in order to respond appropriately.⁵⁶

The fourth action is the opening of the arms again. Volf writes, "Though embrace itself is not terminal, the movement of the self to the other and back has no end. This movement is circular; the actions and reactions of the self and the other condition each other and give the movement both meaning and energy."⁵⁷ The movement is spiraling, in that both influence the other in their movement.

⁵⁶ The idea of being both a host and a guest has been developed by John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 70.

⁵⁷ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 145.

Pattern #5: Empowered Co-Creation

The pattern of Empowered Co-creation highlights that *missio Dei* cannot be defined *a priori*. The Incarnation and the work of the cross demonstrate that God's revelation is *a posteriori*, as it exceeded and transcended the expectations of all who were looking for Israel's Messiah. No prophet could imagine, much less predict, *a priori* the exact manner in which the ultimate revelation of God would come. Only after the revelation of the cross, *a posteriori*, could the writers of the New Testament put the pieces together. In the same way, the church that is participating in *missio Dei* discovers the performance of *missio Dei* along the way. Alan Torrance writes, "As such, it is a form of discovery which is unique in that it is 'performative' in its significance, that is, the discovery 'act-ually' (as this discovery is divine act) or ek-statically effects in us the subjective participation which it denotes objectively."⁵⁸ The cross is the objective standard, but the way that the cross gets worked out subjectively in local contexts is "discovered." If we fail to approach God in this way, we come to him with our abstract categories of deity, that is we do not relate to him subject to subject. We objectify God and make him to conform to our categories. But if we approach God *a posteriori*, then God gets to define God, and we must abstain from the claim that we can know what mission will look like on the journey of participation in the mission of the triune God. As soon as we try to lock down a specific form, then we elevate that form to the point that the church is participating in the form, not in the life of *missio Dei*.⁵⁹ The four parts of the following diagram illustrate how mission is discovered *a posteriori*.

⁵⁸ Torrance, 320.

⁵⁹ This is exactly what happens with the five teloi of missional church. For instance, when we define mission in terms of the *a priori* form of an organic, flat structure that can promote movement growth

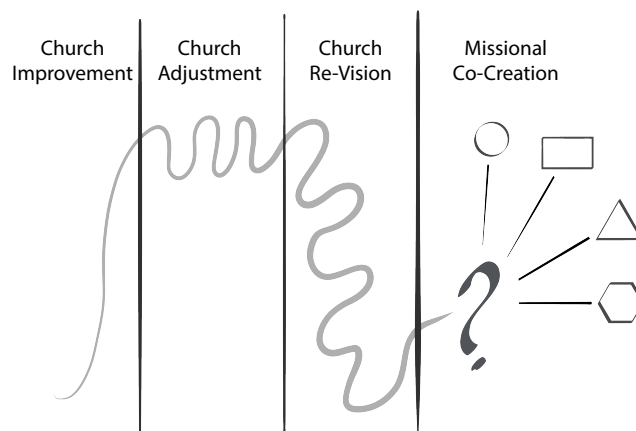


Figure 29: Missional Co-Creation

The four parts in this diagram are four imaginative spaces that inform how a church perceives what it means to move into the future. In the first space, a church views its movement into God’s mission as incremental improvement. At this point, a new strategy might be adopted that is based on principles and practices that it can control to take a church from its current reality toward an intended set of results.⁶⁰

The second space is similar to the first but different in the fact that the church is not really showing improvement or progress. It is adjusting what it already knows how to do—often through the adoption of new principles and practices, which only results in short-term successes, followed by short-term down-turns. While these principles and

(as promoted in the work of Alan Hirsch and others), then we relate not to the God of mission, but to the principles of mission that define what it means to be a movement kind of church. We then are participating in those principles, not in the beauty of God. One might very well successfully argue that such a simple, organic, movement-promoting church aligns with God’s being as Father-Son-Spirit, and one might very well argue conclusively that such an alignment is preferable to the kind of church that developed in the West after Constantine (what a generalization) that depends upon the complexity of buildings, leadership hierarchy, institutional layers, and large budgets. However, the grid used when established church structures are deconstructed and when movement structures are prescribed is one that assumes that a new a priori structure is required to replace the old a priori structure. In other words, we deconstruct one franchise model of doing church and replace it with another one.

⁶⁰ The following is an adaption of material which I applied to the development of missional small group systems in M. Scott Boren, *Missiorelate: Becoming a Church of Missional Small Groups* (Houston: TOUCH Publications, 2011). Here I am working out this for the life of the church in general.

practices adopted in the church improvement and church adjustment stages are not evil in and of themselves, they both work from an *a priori* pattern and thereby can hinder a local congregation from perceiving what the Spirit is doing beneath the surface.

The third and fourth spaces of this diagram illustrate the movement toward an *a posteriori* pattern. The third, called Church Re-Vision, is shaped by the aesthetics of perceiving the invisible in the visible. In this Re-Vision space, the church embraces the journey toward death, not necessarily a death of the organization but death to what it knows how to do. This is a period of unlearning and requires a church, or a small portion of the church to let go of control and make room for the Spirit to birth something new.⁶¹ This invisible birthing is not something that is perceived from the onset. Instead it is something that can only be envisioned as it is discovered through experience as people develop their ability to perceive what the Spirit is doing.⁶²

The fourth space of this journey is called Missional Co-Creation. Here as one moves through the unknowing designated by the question mark, the future of the church is imagined as it “arises” in local contexts, which might actually be repulsive on the surface. The various images on the far right depict this creative “arising” which cannot be strategized from the center of control of church leadership, but can only be innovated by those who have had their imaginations Re-Visioned.⁶³ In this space, room is given for the

⁶¹ See Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997). In this book, he uses the anthropological category of liminality, or a period of unknowing, that is experienced by adolescent males in tribal communities when they shift from their known world of being raised by women to the unknown male world of hunting, fighting, and farming.

⁶² Boren, *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community That Makes a Difference in the World*.

⁶³ On innovation as it relates to what I’m calling Missional Co-Creation see Zscheile., and Moynagh, *Church in Life: Emergence, Ecclesiology and Entrepreneurship*.

unexpected gifts of the Spirit through God's people⁶⁴ alongside the gifts offered within the local context.⁶⁵ Arising through the gifts, the community-in-mission that is appropriate to the local context is "discovered."

From this Co-Creation emerges contextual expressions of church that cannot be predicted from the center but can only be given birth from the fringes. The variety of shapes to the far right of the image above depicts that different forms of life that community-in-mission might take as a church engages a specific context. In this way, the beauty of God is discovered in the midst of life—as opposed to pulling people out of their lives and into the church—and the church is translated into various contexts.⁶⁶

The Practices of Missional Church

Working in tandem with the Poetics and Performance of missional church is Practices. The capacity to perform the poetic script as a church shaped by God's beauty is developed through spiritual practices that are appropriate to the end of participating in God's mission. The view of practices espoused by MacIntyre introduced in chapter three provides a generic grid that can be applied to any walk of life, including sports, vocation, hobbies, relationships, parenting or cooking. When we consider practices as they relate to the beauty of *missio Dei*, they must be conceived in a way that is "appropriate to and partially definitive of" the *telos* of the beauty of God. Being that God's end is accomplished through God's means, these practices are not merely human activities. They are practices "of the Spirit" as the Spirit works in and through the practices to both

⁶⁴ See Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*.

⁶⁵ McKnight and Block.

⁶⁶ This relates to the principles of reciprocity listed in chapter five. Also see Moynagh, *Church in Life: Emergence, Ecclesiology and Entrepreneurship*.

lead the practice itself and to use that practice to create the capacity. “Practices of the Christian faith . . . are not . . . activities we do to make something happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us.”⁶⁷ This is the work of the Spirit, and the practices adopted are a way to align with what the Spirit is doing.

In other words, the practices are not human actions in order to develop capacity for the Spirit to work through the people of God. The Spirit is at work in the practices themselves. The beauty of God leads to the beauty of God, as God’s people are transformed by beauty for the sake of beauty or from “glory to glory,” as the Apostle Paul put it. The Spirit works through practices in order to develop in God’s people the *capax Dei* for *missio Dei*. We might imagine this like the capacity of an iceberg divided into three parts.

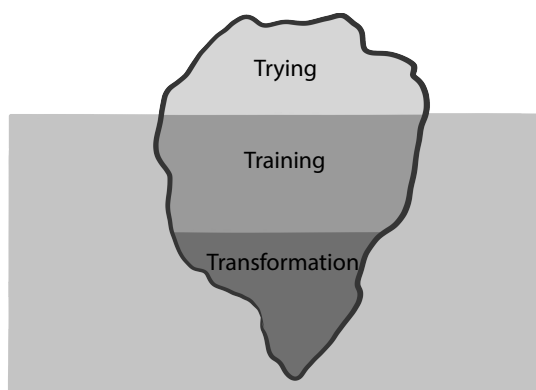


Figure 30: Trying, Training, Transformation

⁶⁷ Dykstra, 66.

Like beauty, most of what makes an iceberg an iceberg is the largest portion that lies beneath the surface. Most of the work of practices is hidden. The following provides a deeper look at each part in turn.

Trying

The visible and tangible actions of mission that occur above the water line are the practices that are enacted through trying. Often this comes in the form of a missional visioning process and a clear plan to make that vision happen organizationally. For instance, a church might identify actions to serve the neighborhood through cleaning up a local park or addressing a specific need of under-resourced people who live in a specific apartment complex.

If the focus only lies here, the church will place its efforts on trying to produce the missional ends that it believes it should produce. The problem is that this creates an environment where the church works to produce God's mission by what the Apostle Paul called, "the works of flesh." The work of the flesh has multiple layers to it in Paul. Of course, there is that of immoral behavior, as seen in Galatians 5:19. However, there is another level. There is the level of life in the "flesh" where humans try to accomplish God's will without the power of the Spirit because it is without the cross. It is trying to produce missional success that does not require death and resurrection.

At the same time, that which is above the water line is still a part of the *capax Dei*.⁶⁸ Trying, effort, planning, and strategy are all important. However, they only are so to the degree that training and transformation are emphasized.

⁶⁸ Most of the missional church literature focuses on practices that emphasize the visible. Rather than castigating this approach, these "above the water line" practices must be set in relationship with what occurs beneath the water line. This acknowledges their value while recognizes their limitations when

Training

Beneath the visible efforts of trying, there is the training that forms the church to participate in God's mission. Training includes the spiritual practices that shape the habits that people live without even thinking about it. For instance, attractional church life is woven deeply into the way that people think and do church, so much so that it has defined the ontology of church. It has been trained by practices of relating to the world as outsiders, where, for instance, the goal is to get under-resourced individuals who live in subsidized apartments into the church. They have been formed to relate to "poor" people with an agenda. To change this ontology requires going below the surface. On the surface, people might commit to moving into mission, but they need training that reforms the habits of how they relate to others.⁶⁹

adopted in isolation. For instance, the authors of *Treasures in Clay Jars* identify eight surface-level "patterns:" (1) discerning missional vocation, (2) biblical formation and discipleship, (3) taking risks as a contrast community, (4) practices that demonstrate God's intent for the world, (5) the public witness of worship, (6) dependence on the Holy Spirit, (7) pointing toward the reign of God, and (8) missional authority, Lois Barrett and et. al., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). In the book *Shaped by God's Heart*, the author identifies nine "essential practices:" (1) have a high threshold for membership, (2) be real, not real religious, (3) teach to obey rather than to know, (4) rewrite worship every week, (5) live apostolically, (6) expect to change the world, (7) order actions according to purpose, (8) measure growth by capacity to release, not retain, and (9) place kingdom concerns first, Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004). Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger observed nine "practices" of what they called "emerging churches:" (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, (3) live highly communal lives, (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁶⁹ Many have proposed varying lists of practices that train churches for missional life. For instance, David Fitch has developed a list a seven "disciplines" that include (1) the Lord's Table, (2) reconciliation, (3) proclaiming the gospel, (4) being with the "least of these," (5) being with the children, (6) fivefold gifting, and (7) kingdom prayer, Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission*. Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson offer six, Alan J. Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for Refounding God's People: The Missional Challenge of the West* (Harrisburg, PA: Church Publishing, 2018). Pat Keifert has developed six of his own: (1) dwelling in the word, (2) dwelling in the world, (3) spiritual discernment, (4) focus on missional action, (5) announcing the kingdom, (6) hospitality, Patrick Keifert, "Six Missional Practices Workshops," <http://www.churchinnovations.org/what-we-do/events/recent-events/>.

Transformation

Transformation of the capacity of our being occurs at the deepest level, where one's character or disposition has been formed by the habits that come through training. For instance, if a church has practiced habits that have insulated them from their context and made them an ingrown community, those patterns have shaped their character of being. We might think of it this way: ingrown community practices become ingrown community habits and those habits cultivate an ingrown community character.

Transformation of character requires patience because the disposition of an individual and a community will only change through a journey of death and resurrection. Human nature is such that it will cause people to rely on the disposition that has been formed within them as long as possible, even to the point of trying to implement an innovation with an incongruous disposition. Character is transformed through "necessary failure,"⁷⁰ which strips away the false pretenses that hinder us from perceiving reality. This character transformation occurs along the journey where people move from naïve progress of the received tradition, to questioning the tradition, to a dark night experience (this is where necessary failure occurs), to a second naïveté, to creative contribution. This journey of transformation is explored in more detail in the following chapter.

Transfixion

Practices that align with God's beauty require the beauty of God. Only beauty can foster beauty. Only a vision of God's glory can bring about God's glory. Edwards writes:

⁷⁰ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011); *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013).

There must be a direct and immediate sense of God's glory and excellency. I say direct and immediate to distinguish from a mere acknowledging that God is glorious and excellent by ratiocination. He that has a blessed-making sight of God, he not only has a view of God's glory and excellency, but he views it as having a propriety in it.⁷¹

As the church is transfixed on God's beauty, the Spirit generates an environment for beauty, for only by God's agency of producing beauty does the church embrace the means to "the end for which the world was created." This occurs as the emanation and the remanation by the Spirit draws the church into participation in the triune life (theosis). We might overlay the movement of God proposed in chapter four with the image of the iceberg in this way.

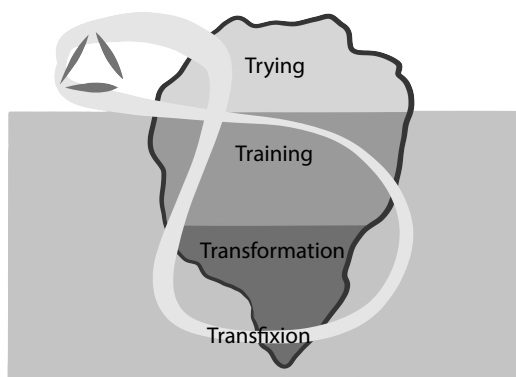


Figure 31: Practicing Transfixion

The Apostle Paul spoke to this in 2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6:

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the

⁷¹ Jonathan Edwards, "The Pure in Heart Blessed," in *Sermons and Discourses*, ed. Mark R. Valeri (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 64.

same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

The following brief comments about this passage are pertinent: First, the context demonstrates how Paul is contrasting the ultimate beauty of Christ on the cross against the limited beauty of the law of Moses. Obviously, there were leaders influencing the Corinthian church who were trying to enforce Old Testament law codes and in doing so they failed to see the true beauty of God because they had a veil covering their hearts (3:15). Paul contrasts this by saying, "But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (3:16).

Secondly, for those whose veil has been removed, they no longer need to depend upon the limited glory of the law because the church has been given the Spirit. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (3:17). The Spirit empowers the church to respond faithfully, in contrast to the law which proved powerless to do so. To use Edwards' language, the Spirit has been given so that the church can join in the remanation of God.

Third, God's people now are transformed as they "contemplate" or "reflect on" the beauty of God. "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (3:17). The NIV translation glosses the word κατοπτριζόμενοι as "contemplate" whereas the NRSV uses the word "seeing as though reflected in a mirror" and the CEB uses "looking in a mirror." The Greek word technically means "to look at a reflection," or "to behold in a mirror." "To behold that splendor as in a mirror is to behold it in Christ. Christ is the mirror of God for believers."⁷² This has specific relevance as it relates to beauty. It speaks of perceiving beyond the surface, to peer into the beauty that lies behind the veneer. We enter into the beauty that we behold in our imagination. Boyd writes, "As we behold the glory of the Lord, we're transformed into that glory."⁷³ We participate in the glorious beauty of God to the degree that we have the ability to perceive God's beauty. As we do this, we are transformed from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory. By the Spirit the church comes "to experience that glory, and will do so in an ever-increasing way until we come to the final glory."⁷⁴ Boyd summarizes it this way:

It is the Spirit-inspired "seeing" of Jesus, Paul said, that changes our being. As we see his glory, we are transformed into his likeness "from one degree of glory to another." This is, in essence, how the fruit of the Spirit is produced in our lives. When we cease from striving in our own effort and yield to the Holy Spirit, and when our faith ceases to be merely intellectual and rather becomes experiential

⁷² Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 239.

⁷³ Boyd, *Seeing Is Believing: Experience Jesus through Imaginative Prayer*, 87.

⁷⁴ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, 319.

and concrete, our lives between to reflect Christ's image. . . . It is what we see, not how hard we strive, that determines what we become.⁷⁵

Fourth, the light of God's beauty shines through us in spite of the reality of our imperfections. Paul states, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (4:7). The great treasure of God's beauty radiates through the weakness of "jars of clay," and thus the very fact that the church falls short of something that triumphs in the normal sense of the word, the glory of God is demonstrated in the church's weakness. The church enters into the practices of the Spirit through transfixion on the beauty of God. This occurs when we create an empty place for God, when we come to the point where we recognize that we cannot produce the beauty that God wants us to be. Bonhoeffer put it this way:

[T]he correct understanding of Christ's cross is nothing more than the most severe intensification of Jesus's own idea of God, the historically visible form, as it were, adopted by that idea. God comes to people who have nothing but space for God, and the language of Christianity calls this void, this emptiness in human beings "faith."⁷⁶

This empty space is the space we make for the Spirit to form beauty within us. We do this as we adopt a set of spiritual practices that opens up the space for the work of the Spirit. Over time, living into these practices will shape the ecclesial habits which will shape the character of the church so that it aligns with the beauty of the cross. This is the case with all forms of character formation, whether one is adopting practices in order to become an accountant or an elementary school teacher. One must enter into an empty space to take on a set of practices that will open them up to being formed in a new way.

⁷⁵ Boyd, *Seeing Is Believing: Experience Jesus through Imaginative Prayer*, 87.

⁷⁶ Bonhoeffer, "Jesus Christ and the Essence of Christianity," 356-57.

If the goal is truth, then the formation process that one adopts revolves primarily around teaching information. If the goal is goodness, then the formation process involves virtuous action. But if the goal is being transfixed by beauty—the beauty of the cross—then the formation process begins with silence. As paradoxical as it might sound, participating in God’s mission in the world does not begin with action. It begins when we enter into what Bonhoeffer called the “void.” While information and action will be a part of the journey, we can never gather enough information to attain the beauty of the cross, nor can it be manufactured through willing ourselves to being beautiful. In the same way that as individuals we cannot “grow” the fruit of the Spirit because it is the fruit “of the Spirit.” The fruit can only grow through the paradox experienced as “we cease our striving, learn to rest in Christ, and allow the Spirit to transform us by his grace.”⁷⁷

The writer of Hebrews explains this paradox by stating: “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:11). To join in God’s mission is to put great energy into the call to rest in the reality that God is at work in, through, and around us. The Spirit of God works through restful force, which makes room in our souls so that we can participate in what God is doing. This means that the way we are on mission will line up with the end of God’s mission. The way we participate in mission is be a sign, instrument, and foretaste, that is to be a demonstration society, of what we want others to join in. The way we are in God’s life of emanation and remanation will reflect the results we want to see in others. We are on mission through this restful force as Christ works in us, through us,

⁷⁷ Boyd, *Seeing Is Believing: Experience Jesus through Imaginative Prayer*, 23.

and around so that others might participate in this same life in Christ. We live out of the embodiment of God's beauty life so that the same can become a reality in others.

The Telos of Beauty and the Five Views of Missional Church

This thesis opened with a brief survey of how the lived expression of missional church has developed since the publication of the multi-authored, seminal title *Missional Church* in 1998.⁷⁸ This history demonstrates how missional church thought leaders often use very similar language but the practical reasoning that gives meaning to their usage varies greatly. These different interpretations of *Missional Church* as lived theologies can be organized into five *teloi* that describe the imagined ends of missional. The illustrations for each of the five *teloi* from chapter two are combined in the following image:

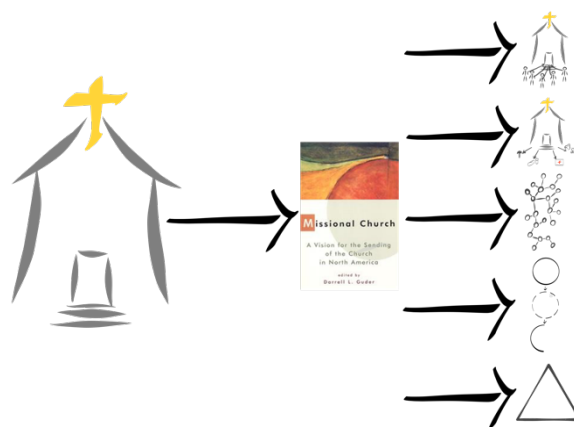


Figure 32: Five Teloi

These *teloi*, for the most part, have defined the work of church leaders within the missional church conversation to this point. The point of including this history in this thesis is to illustrate how the missional church conversation has primarily been shaped by varying emphases of truth and goodness. The proposals for the living out the missional

⁷⁸ Guder et al.

church have been driven by questions that aim to define what is reasonable and useful about the missional church.

This thesis has argued that an alternate *telos* of beauty redefines our imagination about the ends of God's mission, the *telos* of the church, and, as a result, the nature of the work of church leadership, which is the subject of the next chapter. Upon an initial reading of this thesis, it might appear that the *telos* of beauty stands as a sixth, mutually-exclusive option alongside the other five. For instance, if a leader has been working according to the strategies of restructuring the church for movement, then they must abandon what they have learned from writers who fall in line with Alan Hirsch and then adopt specific missional church strategies that align with beauty. This conclusion is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of beauty. As was argued in chapter three, beauty is not a state of being that exists alongside truth and goodness. Instead it is the "invisible in the visible" as Milbank succinctly stated or that which lies beneath the surface as derived from Boyd's Cruciform Hermeneutic. Beauty is that which gives value to the visible forms that appear on the surface, thereby bringing life to truth and goodness. It is not actually an alternate form or a sixth option. Instead it provides a way to reframe the conversation about the truth and goodness of the missional church.

Essential to this reframe is understanding the difference between two categories of *telos*, the ultimate and the penultimate. The ultimate *telos* is that which one works toward for its own sake because it contains within it its own value. That which is ultimate is the highest end beyond which there is nothing greater. It is what it is and it defines the means and all other subordinate or penultimate ends. Penultimate *teloi* are subordinate ends that exist in support of the ultimate. That which is penultimate does not exist as an

end that is valued in and of itself, but as an intermediate end that points and leads to the ultimate.

In this thesis, beauty as defined by the revelation of the cross is the ultimate *telos* of *missio Dei* and therefore the ultimate *telos* of the missional church. The five views of the missional church are examples of penultimate *teloi* which, to varying degrees, can play a secondary role to support the movement toward the ultimate. The problem is that common missional church language has been elevated to the level of the ultimate, most often, simply because beauty has not been a part of the conversation. Therefore, much ink has been spilled to determine which option is more reasonable and useful. This has resulted in the creation of missional idols instead of missional churches, as leaders have turned penultimate dreams for the church into ideals to be achieved, a move that actually undermines *missio Dei*. It turns people into cogs in the machinery for accomplishing those missional ideals, which becomes the center around which the leader tries to gather the people. The ideal of the penultimate takes on a life of its own, and it places demands upon the leadership, the people, and ultimately on God to fulfill those ideals. We shape our ideals, and thereafter they shape us; and they are terrible task masters, even dictators, that must be appeased.

The ideals come in many forms in the missional church conversation. Those who espouse evangelistic growth are tempted to put conversion at the center. Those who promote community impact can easily fall into the trap of organizing everything around the drumbeat of activism and effort. Prophets of restructuring the church for movement elevate the search for the right kinds of structures. The theopoliticians succumb to the never-ending loop of faithful practice. And the teachers of contextual engagement raise

the standard of the translatability of the gospel in every culture. Each perspective has made and continues to make an important contribution to the conversation. However, none of these voices are to be the central, driving motif of God's mission, as they are designed to play a penultimate role. Without a clear picture of the ultimate, the truth and goodness of any specific view rises to the level of an ideal. Then pastors fall into camps: "I am of Stetzer!", "I am of Hirsch!", or "I am of Roxburgh!"

The specific contributions of these five views can be incredibly valuable when they are perceived rightly as penultimate in nature. If the beauty of the cross is the ultimate revelation of God, then it must serve as the plumb line that determines the value of any and all contributions of what it means to be a missional church. As a result, the contributions of each view that aligns with the cross will be magnified, and others must fall away, as there are no perfect expressions of beauty this side of the eschaton. Our models and methods must be held with open hands, always open for their reforming on the journey toward God's beauty. The following is a brief, exploratory analysis of each view in light of the cross.

Missional Church as Evangelistic Growth

The message of the cross is one that calls sinners to repentance as they are given the opportunity to perceive and receive the good news. All missional church thought leaders uphold this claim. However, Ed Stetzer and those who work within his perspective highlight this view more than others. Due to the fact that we now live in a post-Christendom era, this voice must be heeded. However, bringing the cross to bear on evangelism confronts common evangelistic strategies. For the most part, the call to emphasize evangelism is shaped by a message of the good news and the invitation to be a

part of God's people is not actually good news. It is a privatized, individualistic gospel which has little to no bearing on one's way of life. It is not a public, political message that reflects the revolution against the principalities and the powers that dominate the broader culture. The cross cuts through our altar calls for "personal salvation" that only pertain to one's inner sense of guilt and confronts our allegiances that are not "good" so that we might participate in a movement called "church" to proclaim and live the "good."⁷⁹

Missional Church as Community Impact

The message of the cross is meant to change the world, as the revelation of the cross was performed in the public square. This is a crucial contribution of this view. Christ proclaimed that he came to set the captives free, to feed the hungry, and heal the sick. The good news is not merely a message about personal salvation and inner transformation, although it is that. However, the cross cuts through our works of justice and social transformation and requires us to ask, "Whose justice?"⁸⁰ Too often the justice that the Western church promotes is one shaped more by free market economics, middle-class values, and autonomous individuality than by the justice of the kingdom. The beauty of the cross must define the impact that the church is called to make.⁸¹ In addition, the life of Christ reveals a kind of impact that depends upon the work of the Spirit, not

⁷⁹ See Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

⁸⁰ This is derived from Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

⁸¹ The work of the Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh is especially helpful in this matter. See William T. Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016).

just the efforts and action of man. While it does involve work, the kind of work performed by Christ requires the anointing of the “Spirit of the Lord” (Luke 4:18).

Missional Church as Restructuring for Movement

One of the greatest contributions of this stream of thought are questions raised about the inherited church structures. When one engages this literature, we are faced with the question Do the church structures as we know them promote *missio Dei*? Sadly, the honest answer to this question is a resounding No! Much of what the church does is only done because that is just what the church knows how to do, not because it promotes movement toward the *telos* of God’s mission. When the cross is brought into the conversation, the analysis of our church structures comes into focus. We then can ask Do the church structures that we have developed engage the real? This question leads us to interpret our inherited church structures to see how they were developed to engage the real of a bygone era.⁸² Then it moves us to not just deconstruct inherited structures, but to reimagine how church might emerge in a new era. The answer regarding future structures is not found in developing some kind of ideal church structure that one might read about in the New Testament or that organically multiplies in Southeast Asia or China. It is about recognizing that the church must be structured to facilitate the intersection of church in life. The cross confronts any dreams we might have about finding a perfect biblical structure. Instead it pulls us into the warp and woof of the day-to-day and draws out the imagination of God’s people to structure the church along the way.

⁸² On this see Roxburgh, *Structured for Mission: Renewing the Culture of the Church*.

Missional Church as Theopolitics

This view forces the missional church to wrestle with the fact that God calls it to be a people of peace that actually reflects the revelation of the cross. The mission of the church is to be the church, because the “church does not have a mission but [is] to be mission,”⁸³ as Hauerwas has proclaimed. The mission, then is for the church to participate in and reflect the cruciform revelation of the cross. Hauerwas writes, “[T]he world cannot know it is the world unless there is an alternative to the world.”⁸⁴ This calls for spiritual formation through ecclesial practices that make space for cruciform discipleship that cause it to be a distinctive people. This beauty of the cross is especially significant in this view as it highlights the distinctive character that is to shape God’s people, as opposed to a form of discipleship that is primarily individualistic and pietistic. In other words, this spiritual formation confronts and subverts the principalities and powers of the primary culture, and it offers an alternative politic or way of living in which the people of God participate. This is no more concretely exemplified than through the commands of the New Testament for the church to be a people of peace.⁸⁵

Theopolitics provides a set of tools to deconstruct the violence that has infiltrated the church, which often comes in very subtle packaging, including the likes of racism, growthism, and heroic leadership. These are character traits that have shaped cultural practices and have been inadvertently adopted in the church, usually because they

⁸³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 165.

⁸⁴ *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 138.

⁸⁵ See Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 29-49.

produce some form of desired results. This view confronts this character and calls the church to live the character of the peace of the cross.

As much as this view has to offer the missional church conversation, the cross also challenges it in two specific ways. First, many take the view of an alternative politic to mean that the church is a parallel culture that is disengaged from the larger culture. Its only job is to be the church within the church, and therefore it is only a public truth as much as the church exists “for the watching world.” It is supposedly not engaged in the realities of the watching world. From my perspective, this is a misinterpretation of Hauerwas’ argument that “The church does not have a mission, but rather is mission.”⁸⁶ I argue that this is a misinterpretation for two reasons. First, common experience demonstrates that it is impossible for the church to be a true parallel society that is not influenced by the broader context. No system—whether a business, a volunteer agency, a school, a family—can operate independently of the broader system. Hauerwas’ own ethical writings reflect a constant engagement across any kind of supposed divide between the secular and the sacred. Secondly, Hauerwas (and Yoder from which he draws his theological imagination on this matter) are calling the church to be the kind of church that actually reflects the character of God, as opposed to the kind of church that plays a part in American Christianity and thereby is on mission to propagate a civil religion of the American gospel cloaked in biblical language. As a result, “those who identify as ‘religious’ assume that their religious convictions should be submitted to the

⁸⁶ Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*, 168.

public order governed by a secular rationality.”⁸⁷ The cross reveals that God died for the world, outside the gates of the holy city. He did as one despised and rejected, as a sinner. The church is mission because its way of life in the midst of the world stands as a sign or an alternative, offering a vision for a different way of life. The world is not watching, in other words, over the walls that divide us to see if the church is distinctive. The world will only see, and therefore possibly perceive, when the church exhibits its life outside the religious gates.

The second challenge to those who espouse this view relates to what John Flett calls “church as culture.” Mission within this view, often merely means the propagation of a fixed form of Western, established church life. Just as those who promote missional church as restructuring for movement can idealize a house-church form, many within this imagination idealize the high-church expression. The cross reveals a God who is open to the other, even to the point of allowing the other to influence the ways that God expresses mission, and thereby expresses the church. Rather than seeing the tradition of the Western expression of the church as unilateral, the cross makes space for creative expressions of church in culture.

Missional Church as Contextual Engagement

This perspective recognizes the translatability of the church into every context, and with the tectonic changes that Western society is experiencing, the lived theology of the church as we know it cannot be assumed to be the church that will actually be a faithful expression in this new era. This view creates open dialogue within the local

⁸⁷ *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 69.

context for discovery of the ways that God is at work, leading to new expressions of the church.⁸⁸

When this view is brought into conversation with the cross, two things come to light. First, the cross provides a missional hermeneutic for interpreting the ways that the established church has been unfaithful to *missio Dei*. Too often, it appears that this stream of the conversation has little critical to say about the form of church—both its common structures along with its alignment with nationalism and violence—that has been such a major part of the history of the church to this point. I make this claim based on the absence of critique; therefore it is an argument from silence. The thought leaders of this view might very well espouse views that are critical of the church as it has developed historically, but those are not the points of emphasis in their writings. The cross not only points a way to an alternative, but also it requires an overt repentance of practices that are not faithful to the cross. If ignored the old church patterns will continue to rule our imaginations.

This leads me to the second corrective that the cross offers. The beauty of God's cruciform revelation is found in the revelation of the divine. While this view highlights the reality of God's presence in history and the Spirit's work in reality of the contextual engagement, not as much emphasis is placed on the mystery of God's invasive, transcendent work. This is illustrated by the near absence of the topic of prayer, intercession, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Again, this is an argument from silence. The cross demonstrates *the way* God is at work in the world, but it also reveals *that* God is at work in the world.

⁸⁸ This is illustrated in the churches reported in Ryan K. Bolger, *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

The Beauty of the Five Views

The view of God's beauty makes space for conversations about the inherent strengths and weaknesses of each lived theology so that we can move beyond the confines of each as if they operate in a mutually-exclusive way. The development of the missional church is a conversation in process. Each of these views are offering important contributions. We need different voices and different perspectives engaging this conversation.⁸⁹ There is a great danger when one stream of thought assumes that it has determined the entire perspective. This is what occurs when the conversation is exclusively or even primarily shaped by truth and goodness. This is not only a conversation about what makes sense or what has value. The sense we make about the future of the church and the value it has—the arguments and debates had between the different views of missional church lived—will be advanced to the degree that we embrace the *telos* of God's beauty. Then the penultimate will not be elevated to the ultimate, and we can learn through the conversations, which is after all an expression of the cross.

The Lived Theology of Beauty

If, in fact, the *telos* of beauty does not offer a sixth option, then it is far too easy for God's beauty to be relegated to the world of ideas that have no actual import for the way we do church. One might read this thesis, agree with its premise, and then return to one of the five lived theologies simply because they operate in the realms of truth and goodness. We know what to do with them, while we do not know what to do with beauty.

⁸⁹ Recent, important work has been done along these lines with the publications of Ott; Jason S. Sexton, ed. *Four Views on the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

On the one hand, this is the reality we face. In order to embrace the *telos* of beauty, one must repent of what is known, let it go, and embrace mystery. Leaders cannot concoct or force beauty, whereas it is possible to focus on truth and goodness in such a way that they can produce results. If beauty is the *telos*, then we must embrace beauty as the means of movement toward that end. This experience can feel like trying to balance Jell-O in one's hand while running.

On the other hand, if the lived theology of beauty is not expressed in tangible terms that are appropriate to the beauty revealed on the cross, then leaders have no other option but to return to something like those illustrated by the five options. Through the interviews initial evidence arose that makes a path for a proposal of how we might imagine a *telos* of the missional church that is shaped by the beauty of the cross. This image aims to reflect this *telos*:

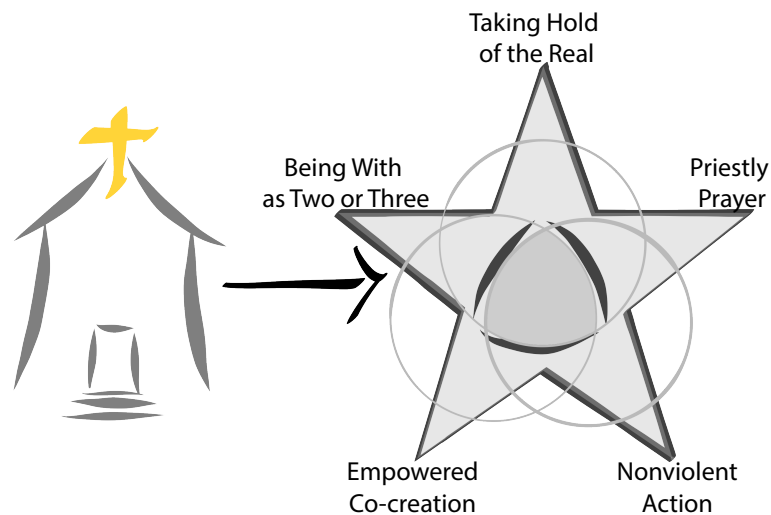


Figure 33: The Lived *Telos* of Beauty

There are three parts of this *telos*. First, there is the triangular shape at the center, which represents the beauty that is Father-Son-Spirit. The people of God are to be drawn into the life of God as participants in God's nature (1 Peter 1:4).

Second, the Venn diagram—the circles represent Communion with God, Relating in Community, Engagement in Context—demonstrates how the life of the church is integrated in mission, as opposed to each operating as disintegrated functions or purposes. The way that we pray, the way we love each other, and the way we dialogue in the local setting all demonstrate the triune love that God is.

Third, the star represents the five patterns of Performance of the cross, which lie beneath the surface that results in the integration of Communion, Relating, and Engagement, and ultimately the beauty of the Trinity. The movement toward the *telos* of God's beauty then occurs through the lived theology of the five patterns because these are the unseen factors that actually beautify the strategy that is developed. This is about the creation of a beatific culture, not about the development of a specific missional strategy or structure.

Therefore, it is possible that aspects of all five views surveyed in chapter two can serve as penultimate *teloi* for the ultimate *telos* of beauty that is fostered by the five patterns. God is in the journey and can work through all of our faulty strategies and structures, even when leaders turn such into idols. Of course, the degree to which leaders refuse to turn their strategies and structures into the ultimate is the degree to which they will actually actively participate in the beauty of God's ultimate *telos*. The point of the five patterns is to put the focus where it belongs.

Conclusion

The *telos* toward which the church is moving and that toward which leaders lead is the *telos* of God, the knowledge of God, and the fullness of God's glory. This is not merely pious language or theological orthodoxy. It is played out in a tangible lived

theology. The way we structure things reflects what we actually believe. The structures are not the *telos* and the process of developing these structures will take longer because beauty cannot be hurried, but when the five patterns of Performance are the focus, open space is generated for the Spirit to work and foster new expressions of God's life.

This chapter offers a proposal for re-imagining the missional church in light of a theological aesthetics. *Missio Dei* that has been re-imagined through the lens of God's beauty (as proposed in chapter four) logically leads to the sending of the church according to that same beauty. This ecclesial beauty is the *telos* of the church, and, at the same time, it is the means that leads to that *telos*. The triune God encompasses the state of the church as it now stands, along with the *telos* that is the ultimate reason for the church and all of creation. The current state of the church is illustrated by the image below on the left where the Communion, Relating, and Engagement are dis-integrated into departmentalized functions. The work of the Spirit moves the church toward the *telos* of divine, integrated beauty which is depicted by the Venn diagram on the right, the center of which reflects the *imago Dei*.

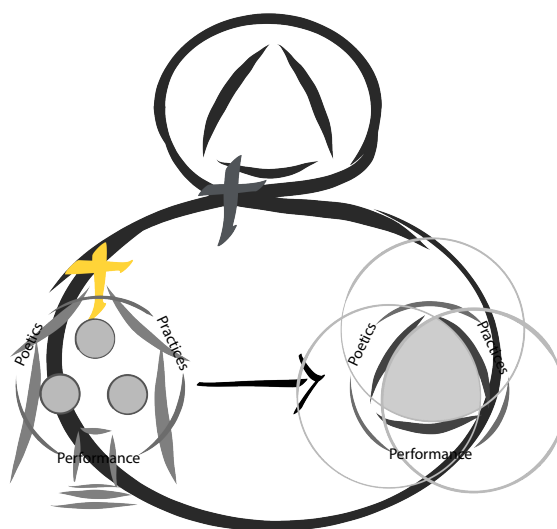


Figure 34: The Telos Is the Means

Through the emanation and remanation of God, the future of God's beauty embarks back upon the present, by the Spirit, to the non-missional church drawing it into a movement toward participating in God's mission. Practically, this is done through the trialogue of Poetics, Performance, and Practices that arises out of a perception of the cruciform God. As the church, in its present state—whatever it might be—embraces the Poetics, Performance, and Practices of triune beauty, thereby investing in the work of God that occurs beneath the surface, the agency of the Spirit guides the church on a journey toward a missional reality. This sets the stage to identify and explicate the nature of pastoral leadership that works toward the *telos* of missional beauty, the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS: REIMAGINING MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP

Introduction

The previous chapter proposed a language for expressing the *telos* of the missional church that aligns with the perception of the beauty of God revealed on the cross. This proposal moves beyond the mere conclusion that since God suffered, the church should also suffer; but instead it looked beneath the surface of the revelation of the cross to perceive the hidden non-violent way that God was working and then explored the veiled non-violent ways that the Spirit works through the church now. This, I am proposing is the space where the church operates in beauty, which sets the stage to return to the original question of this research project, that is:

How has theological aesthetics informed the way missional pastors lead?

Missio Dei viewed through the lens of theological aesthetics informs the *telos* of missional church, which shapes what it means to lead people toward that *telos*. The research reported in chapter six highlighted four leadership roles that are informed by theological aesthetics. Out of the Poetics of the *telos* of God's beauty, poets arise. As the church Performs, pastors serve as hosts. To foster Practices, God's leaders offer spiritual direction. The final role is that of a navigation guide who speaks to the Pilgrimage for

generating movement toward the *telos*. This chapter builds on the concluding image from chapter six that emerged from the results of the exploratory interviews.

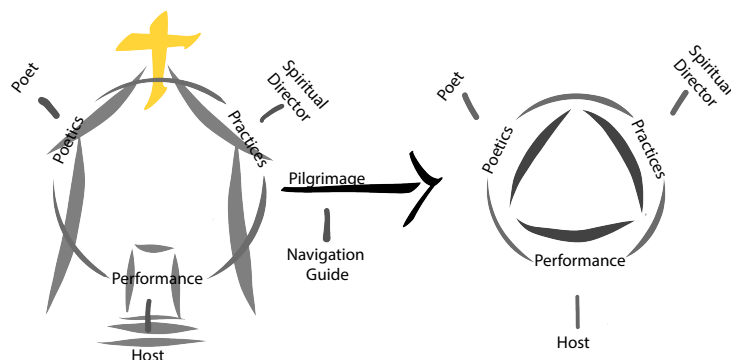


Figure 35: Four Leadership Roles

The four leadership roles that promote the *telos* of missional beauty are best understood as shifts away from commonly-promoted pastoral roles, which have been central to the church as it has been known. To foster Poetics, leaders must shift from teacher to poet. To facilitate Performance, leaders must shift from hero to host. To generate Practices, leaders must shift from program manager to spiritual director. The final shift is a movement from strategist to navigator, which is related to the Pilgrimage.

From Teacher to Poet

The Poetics of missional church is facilitated by leaders who serve as poets. The role of the poet can best be understood in contrast to the role of a teacher, as traditionally practiced within the church since the Reformation. The teacher has been one who focuses on propositional content, dispersing abstract principles and practices in a monological or didactic form so that the audience can understand their logic. Within the imagination of a teacher, the missional teachings of the Scriptures, and specifically those of Jesus, become the point of emphasis. However, participating in the beauty of interactive improvisation

of God's *missio Dei* pushes the limits of teaching because it requires communication of the invisible that lies beneath the surface of the visible principles and practices. The missional leader must communicate beyond the limits of explicating content to embrace the role of a poet, one who expresses God's beauty according to his or her unique voice.

The role of the missional poet is not that of repeating missional teachings developed by missional thought leaders because the beauty of God is not expressed through exact repetition of content based in logic, but through the reduplication of poets. This is not to diminish the importance of the content of missional theology; it merely goes beyond it because the voices of the poets matter. The unique voice of the pastor as poet matters because poetic expression is about the leader being free to express what only he or she can offer, which results in others being able to express their unique voices. This is not about reduplicating the teaching or the actions that makes a specific strategy work. This is about reduplicating the freedom to find and offer other creative expressions of God's poetry.¹

Abstract teaching that is didactic and monological is direct communication, whereas poetry is indirect, imaginative, and evocative as it draws the other to perceive that which lies beneath the truth and goodness of the actual concepts being taught. This poetry is not that of systematic truths where the pastor merely explains the ins and outs of what it means to follow Jesus or what the gospel means. To explore how this poetic voice

¹ Kierkegaard concluded, "Wherever it is the case that the teacher is an essential component, there is a reduplication; the reduplication lies in precisely this, that the teacher is integral; but wherever there is reduplication, the communication is not completely direct paragraph communication or professor communication. Reduplicated in the teacher through his existing and what he teaches, the communication is in manifold ways a self-differentiating art," Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 123.

is developed, the Newbigin triangle which I introduced in the previous chapter is instructive.

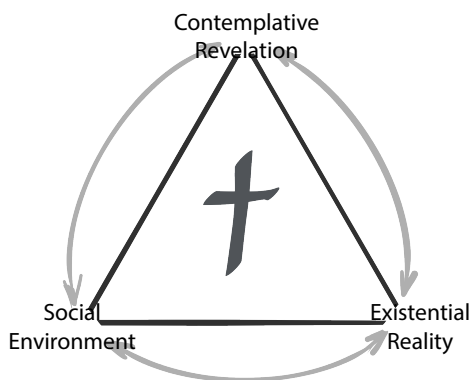


Figure 36: Poetic Engagement

Beneath the surface of gospel, church, and context, we discover the invisible of contemplative revelation of the one who speaks the gospel, social expression of the church, and existential reality of the local context. This is the fodder from which the missional poetry arises. The following briefly explores each.

With regard to the *contemplative revelation*, we recognize that there is a degree of mystery when one looks beneath the veneer of what is visible. There is more than what can be merely ascertained according to the physical senses. In the Scriptures, there is always a transcendent, even mystical, dimension to the poetry or experience which empowers the church to express and perceive what God is doing in the immanent expression. For instance, the story of Peter’s encounter with Cornelius and his household is one of the most significant narratives that speaks to how the *missio Dei* occurs at the fringes—as opposed to the center of the church—thereby illustrating how the Spirit is at work in the midst of the world (Acts 10). However, this immanent move by the Spirit was initiated by a transcendent unveiling that empowered Peter to perceive the *missio Dei* in a new light. In similar fashion, Cornelius had a vision and those who believed spoke in

unknown tongues. None of these things can be explained merely on the level of the physical experience. There is the encounter with the active Thou of contemplative revelation that opens the poet's eyes to see God and what God is doing in the world.²

Poets do their work within the *existential reality* of a local context. The goal of the poet is to name the reality, make space for grief, and to offer hope, which does not occur at the level of the universal.³ The greatest poetry is expressed in the midst of the reality of a particular time and space, as exemplified by the most transcendent expressions of art—whether the epic writing of Dante, the paintings of Van Gogh, or the stories of Mark Twain—as they arise out of the fodder of the local pains and joys faced by the contemporaries of the poets. This means that the poet is willing to enter into a deep understanding of the local. Leaders that fail to do this are actually promoting false hope for the church.

Third, poets offer their voices within a *social environment*. They not are offering a mere repetition of what has already been named within that environment; instead they are offering an alternative imagination about what might be possible. “A creative act always rises above reality; it means imagining something other and better than the reality

² Edwards argued, “Things being thus, it plain appears, that God’s implanting that spiritual supernatural sense which has been spoken of, makes a great change in a man, and were it not for the very imperfect degree, in which this sense is commonly given at first, or the small degree of this glorious light, that first downs upon the soul; the change made by this spiritual opening of the eyes in conversion, would be much greater and more remarkable every way, than if a man, who had been born blind, and with only the other four senses, should continue so a long time, and then at once should have the sense of seeing imparted to him, in the midst of the clear light of the sun, discovering a world of visible objects. For though sight be more noble than any other of the external senses, yet this spiritual sense which has been spoken of, is infinitely more noble than that, or any other principle of discerning that a man naturally has, and the object of this sense infinitely greater and more important,” Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 275.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

around us.”⁴ The creative act in some ways offers the unexpected. It raises questions that are not being asked by the reality, and it proposes answers that do not appear possible. As a result, the poet disrupts the status quo. Walter Brueggemann writes,

Imagination is the capacity to picture (imagine!) the world out beyond what we take as established given. Imagination is an ability to hold loosely what the world assumes and to walk into alternative contours of reality, which we have only in hint and trace. Imagination is a peculiar province of artists, artists of all kinds; it is for that reason that artists are always at the edge of causing trouble, always seen to be troublemakers whom established types view with suspicion. The vocation of the artist is to provide a sub-version of reality that insistently subverts the ordinary.⁵

The encounter between the vision of God’s beauty, the reality of context, and the voice of community is not one of congenial convergence. It is not something that occurs as someone puts on a recording of Bach and then invites everyone into a peaceful room to create together. Nor is this something that arises out of an orchestrated process whereby the church performs expensive research and then through a long process names the nature of its mission focus. The poetic hope always arises out of the pain of conflict between the three corners of the triangle. There the Spirit is found in the movement between the three corners and generative possibilities arise out of the disequilibrium found there. Without the pain of conflict there is no poetic voice. Without questions, without angst, without differences, hope lies dormant.

From Hero to Host

The Performance of God’s beauty is facilitated by leaders who serve as hosts. This stands in contrast to the common imagination of the pastor as a spiritual hero, that is

⁴ Nicolas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 218.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 296.

those who stand above the common church member. The role of the host is rooted in the identity of sainthood that the pastor shares with those he or she leads. God does not call pastors and church leaders to be heroes, zealots, or radicals. Instead he calls pastors to lead from their identity as “saints,” that is holy or set apart for him. Heroic leadership calls for success and triumph on the journey. It means meeting the expectations of the traditional pastor while at the same time leading people into a new future. It leaves no room for failure because heroes have to be the center of the story.⁶ Pastors who lead according to the beauty of God are not heroes. They are simply saints whose identity is not about clamoring for attention but about fostering safe places for others to discover what God has been doing, is doing, and wants to do. Henri Nouwen wrote,

No minister can save anyone. He can only offer himself as a guide to fearful people. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in this guidance that the first signs of hope become visible. This is because a shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation. When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.⁷

Pastors do this by playing the role of a host. For instance, in a production of interactive improvisation, the director who has invested the most energy is actually invisible. The players get the attention, while the director gets her name on the program. The night of the production, the director plays the role of the host, the one who makes space for the safe improvisation. Andrew Root offers the label of curator, when he writes,

Ministry is the curating of [tangible places between persons], these in-between spaces, through facilitation of locales that allow people to share in each other's needs, to see each other as persons. No pastor has the power to create these

⁶ Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, 44.

⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 94.

places. They are spiritual; they are outgrowths of the work of the Holy Spirit manifest in the mystery of persons seeing each other face to face, of wiring their brains together by encountering each other.⁸

This means that the role of the host or curator is to open up safe places for others to perceive and get involved with what God is doing and wants to do. This is not a prescribed performance. It is discovered in the moving back and forth within the safe places that have been curated.⁹

One key to the power of hosting is that the leader must host in a way that can be easily replicated by those involved in the space. Unlike heroic leadership where the expert performs a special activity that the recipient cannot replicate—which is the primary pattern of both the traditional pastor along with the new version of the spiritual mega-star of marquee churches—the host leads in such a way that whatever he or she is doing can be replicated by others.

For instance, training provided by the hero is often provided as an information dump, which means that those being trained will replicate the same pattern when they try to lead others. The host trains by fostering a safe place for people to discover and be discovered. The host does not teach about the need for creating such safe places; instead he or she trains by offering an experience of that safe place.¹⁰

⁸ Root, 163.

⁹ The biblical image that correlates with that of being host or curator is the oft-repeated metaphor of a shepherd. With a basic understanding of the characteristics of sheep, it quickly becomes clear how leading as a shepherd is about the creation of safe environments. On the nature of sheep and the implications for leading them, see M. Scott Boren, *Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 34-36.

¹⁰ This raises questions about the unique gifts of leaders who can guide the church in powerful and even spectacular ways. For instance, those who are empowered to teach or prophecy have gifts that shape any training event simply because they are present. The role of the host does not aim to create a generic space and thereby eliminate anything that might be deemed as spectacular. The point is that the environment is not created by or centered around the spectacular.

From Program Manager to Spiritual Director

The leadership role of the spiritual director corresponds with the Practices of beauty, which stands in contrast to the common leadership pattern of program manager. Typically, the pastor is expected to set the destination and then develop a program that will move the church in the right direction. The leader as program manager is required to perceive the leading of the Spirit *for* the people of God and then do the work so that the people need only do what is required of the program. In contrast, the work of the spiritual director is that of perceiving the leading of the Spirit *with, in, and alongside* the people of God. Angela Reed writes, “[S]piritual direction is spiritual in that it looks for the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in all of life, and it is direction in that it is a relationship of coming alongside one another who seeks God’s direction for living.”¹¹ The director leads through listening in order to guide the spiritual practices that will form the people of God for missional performance. Questions, rather than answers, are especially important. The following offers three questions the shape the leadership as a spiritual director.

What *has* the Spirit been doing?

The first question is Where have we traveled? A key to participating in *missio Dei* is to listen to the journey up to the present. Spiritual guidance calls for a deep understanding of what has led the church and individuals to this point in history. This perception of the past does not aim to deconstruct to get to an ideal, but neither does it aim simply to build upon what has been received.

¹¹ Angela H. Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 8-9.

One simple way to develop the ability to perceive what the Spirit has been doing is an adapted form of the Ignatian Examen, which was originally practiced as an extensive reflection on how God has been at work and the various ways that one has fallen short of participating with God in his work in the world. Ignatius encouraged people to practice the Examen on a daily basis, or even as often as morning, noon, and night.¹²

The pastor as a spiritual guide walks people through the Examen on four levels. The first, as it has been traditionally applied, is the personal level.¹³ The second level is that of the local church, which combats the tendency to either denigrate church tradition (as often found by those who promote an idealistic view of missional church)¹⁴ or those who project the received tradition of the Western church upon all contexts.¹⁵ The third level occurs by listening to how the Spirit has been at work in the “identity group” which

¹² Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* trans. Anthony Mottola (New York: Image, 1964).

¹³ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home, 10th Anniversary Edition* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 27-35.

¹⁴ A brief introduction to the Missional as Church Movement in chapter two alludes to this common theme, one that has roots in the work of Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It*. It has been carried forth in modern literature in by a variety of authors who try to get back to a supposed ideal form of the first-century church, including Snyder; Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*; Cole. *ibid*.

¹⁵ As noted in the challenges with the language of *missio Dei* in chapter three, mission has traditionally been viewed as an extension of the established “church as culture” into new contexts. See critique of this pattern in Flett, *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective*.

is the primary influence upon an individual's "social construction of reality."¹⁶ Level four occurs when we are guided to listen deeply to what God is doing in our local context.¹⁷

What is the Spirit doing now?

The second question leaders can use to enter into the role of spiritual guidance is to ask where God is at work in the present. Like a GPS app on one's phone, asking this question points to the current reality. This calls for a paradigm of leading the people of God as a journey, not a destination. This reflects how people grow in faith and as leaders. They do not jump to a new destination but are "in progress" as they lead on the way.

To locate where one is on the journey, it is helpful to see a big picture of how a typical journey might look.¹⁸ This can be illustrated by a series of stages.

Stage 1: Progress in Our Journey. Here the person follows the patterns of the received tradition. Faith and leading others into faith is about repeating what we have

¹⁶ Applying The Examen at this level is based on well-established sociological claim that even though Western identity is individualistic in nature, that identity is actually socially constructed as every individual is set within a primary identity group that shapes and reinforces how one perceives who they are, where they belong, what they can contribute, and where their life is going. See Kenneth J. Gergen, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality & Mission in the Neighborhood* (Victoria, Australia: Acorn Press, 2007). This also relates to a deep understanding of the built environment of the local context in which a church is set. See Eric O. Jacobsen, *The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment*, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

¹⁸ The following is adapted from an integrative perspective of a variety of writers who work from an understanding that faith development is a process that moves through a series of stages. For instance, Bernard of Clairvaux introduced the four degrees of love in "On Loving God," in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works, the Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 173-205. James Fowler develops the motif of a spiritual journey from a psycho-social perspective in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). Alan Jamieson is a pastor who has wrestled with this phenomenon within a post-Christian context in Alan Jamieson, *Chrysalis: The Hidden Transformation in the Journey of Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007). Richard Rohr writes of the two halves of faith development, Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. See also *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*. What follows also seeks to recognize the crucial role that the dark night of the soul, as poetically expressed by St. John of the Cross, plays in one's journey. This dark night experience as it relates to leadership and the life of the church that is moving into a new missional reality can be understood through the anthropological category of liminality as introduced by Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality*.

learned. In most cases it comes in a rather formulaic way: If you do a + b + c you will get the expected outcome. This is a kind of first-level naïveté.

Stage 2: Dialogue with Tradition. At this point, one begins to question, to challenge, the received tradition. Life with God, church and leadership doesn't quite work out like all of the formulas promise. A deeper reality is intuited, but it is not obvious. The things that once proved effective no longer are. The things that have been taught and practiced as a part of the received tradition no longer produce the fruit that they once did. People in this stage are looking for safe places to ask big questions, but most of the time church leaders are so busy trying to pull off Stage 1 ministry and spirituality that such safe places are rare.

State 3: Dark Night of the Journey. When one moves into this stage, the questions initiated in stage two rise to the top. They are no longer merely questions; instead they are a pervading reality. Often this stage is brought on by a significant failure or tragedy. At this point, it becomes obvious that life, ministry, and leadership patterns of the received tradition are not living up to what they promise. Alan Roxburgh employs the anthropological category of liminality, a stage of uncertainty, discovery, and transition to name the experience of the dark night. Liminality he writes is "the conscious awareness that as a group (or individual) one's status-, role-, and sequence-sets in a society have been radically changed to the point where the group has now become largely invisible to the larger society in terms of these previously held sets. . . . [W]hen a group moves into a liminal state, there is an initial period of confusion, a groping about in order to understand the new location."¹⁹ This dark night period can be experienced by an

¹⁹ *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality*, 25-26.

individual within a church or as a group. This is a period of confusion, an in-between place where it is obvious that old, established patterns are no longer acceptable but an alternative has yet to emerge.

Stage 2.5: Caught in the Loop. Before identifying the alternative that lies beyond Stage 3, it is helpful to identify two places on the journey where people can easily get stuck. The first lies between Stage 2 and 3. Holding onto the past, people deny deep questions and do everything possible to avoid the movement toward the pain of the dark night.

Stage 3.5: Entrapped in the Darkness. The second place people often get stuck occurs during this dark night stage. This part of the journey is a valley of identity formation where the things that have shaped who we are in the past are stripped away. At this point, brokenness becomes an obvious reality which leaves us with options. We can be broken apart, which means that our pain controls us. We can be broken but bandaged, which means that we try and control the pain. Those who opt for these two find themselves stuck in a spirituality of antagonism where they know more about what they are against than what they are for. The third option is that of being broken open, where one embraces the darkness found in the brokenness and allows God to create a new future out of it. This prepares the way for the next stage.

Stage 4: A Second Naïveté. This is the stage of paradox because everything is new again, but perception has been cleansed by failure of the dark night experience. Whereas the learning in stage one came with naïveté, this learning embraces reality with simplicity while not being simplistic. Whereas in the past, people do certain things to get specific results, now they obey out of character and identity.

Stage 5: Creative contribution. This is the place of swimming with the Spirit, of ministry and leadership based in the knowledge of self so that one can offer his or her unique contribution to the world.

The role of the spiritual director is to ask questions so that people—both individually and as a group—can perceive what God is doing in their lives at that point of their journey. It is not to get people to go through a set curriculum, to help them implement a predetermined set of practices or to get them to a specific place on the journey. As people become clear about their location on the journey, they can adopt practices that will help them take the next steps on the journey.

What does the Spirit want to do?

The third question^a helps spiritual directors guide people toward discerning what God wants to do. The ancient practice of Scripture reading called *lectio divina* shapes a person's imagination to see what God wants to do. As opposed to reading the Bible in a way that is analytical (asking, "What does this mean?"), practical ("What do I do with this?"), or inspirational ("What does this mean for my life?"), *lectio divina* invites the reader to enter into the imagination of the Scripture. Eugene Peterson writes:

Lectio divina is a way of reading the Scriptures that is congruent with the way the Scriptures serve the Christian community as a witness to God's revelation of himself to us. It is the wise guidance developed through the centuries of devout Bible reading to discipline us, the readers of Scripture, into appropriate ways of understanding and receiving this text so that it is formative for the way we live our lives, not merely making an impression on our minds or feelings. It intends the reading of Scripture to be a permeation of our lives by the revelation of God.²⁰

²⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 81.

This approach to reading Scripture gets the words into our being. A practice that is related to *lectio divina* is called Dwelling in the Word, which has been used extensively by the leaders studied for this project. It is a group-oriented practice for engaging the Scriptures that works in a similar way to *lectio divina* which has the potential to shape the imagination of a people so they can discern what the Spirit wants to do. Ellison and Keifert write:

[Dwelling in the Word] gives people the chance to be listened into free speech. It gives everyone a more equitable access into the conversation and the community that is being formed in the scriptural story. And over time, it gives the group the chance to see that they are living a story, and that their story is a part of God's story. It is not magic or formulaic or prescriptive. It is holy. It creates the community of good will that opens time and space for spiritual discernment for the sake of God's mission.²¹

The distinct gift of Dwelling in the Word is that it generates a space for people to listen deeply to one another. After listening to the public reading of a biblical passage, the group divides into partners to share what stood out to them. Following this, each person is invited to share what they heard their partner saying. This second sharing is the space where the discovering of what God wants to do emerges.

From Strategist to Navigator

This project did not directly study the Pilgrimage adopted by pastors in leading their churches toward missional church. Therefore, I did not explore the relationship of Pilgrimage to theological aesthetics and *missio Dei*. Nor did it seek to understand Pilgrimage in relationship to the *telos* of missional ecclesiology in the light of God's beauty. However, the lenses of Poetics, Performance, and Practices set the stage to

²¹ Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word: A Pocket Handbook* (Saint Paul, MN: Church Innovations, 2013), 91.

ascertain an initial understanding of the Pilgrimage that is informed by divine beauty and the corresponding pastoral role that facilitates this Pilgrimage. The language and imagination that a church and its leaders have of the way that God works with people where they are and leads them to the next step on the journey is crucial to a leader's ability to participate in God's agency of Pilgrimage. Therefore, a worthy topic for further research would be The Pilgrimage of *Missio Dei*, which would be a part of chapter four and The Pilgrimage of Missional Church, which would be a part of chapter six.

The Pilgrimage is fostered by pastoral leaders who play the role of a navigation guide. In contrast, pastors tend to conceive of leading people on the journey of mission as the result that their direct efforts, as if they control the outcomes because of the specific vision, strategies, and structures they have adopted. With this mindset, leaders choose one of the five missional church strategies surveyed in chapter two and then they get to work. They focus on external actions which promise the results of conversions, community impact, discipleship, and confrontation of social/structural evil. This is an $a + b + c =$ missional-church-results strategy.

There are two basic problems with this. The first is theological, as the leader—most often with very good intentions—operates as if God is not present and thereby produces the best that he or she can without God's action. Instead of leading from a perspective of God's emanation and remanation that empowers the church to perform the cross, the pastor leads the church into a zone of doing the best she can for God. The challenge of theological aesthetics is meant to point to a different way.

The second problem arises out of the reality of how people respond to change. Once a leader adopts a strategy and begins to move toward the lived theology of

missional church, they often see initial success. In most cases, this is because they have implemented basic technical solutions to technical challenges that can produce short-term results. However, as they move forward, they encounter adaptive challenges which cannot be so easily addressed. The new strategies that generated initial success are no longer working. Questions arise and doubts surface that cause people to challenge the missional strategy. At this point, people revert back to the habits of church life that they know.

This is natural because when challenges arise that leaders do not know how to address, that to which the church is accustomed serves as an anchor, keeping it mired in what it knows. The customs, or habits, which have been shaped by practices, have formed the disposition of those who form the congregation, limiting the church from perceiving and addressing the adaptive challenge, and from moving into a new future on the other side of that adaptive challenge.²²

Addressing adaptive challenges requires indirect leadership that is shaped by the veiled beauty of the cross, meaning two things. First, instead the role of visionary and strategic manager, indirect leadership resembles the role of the navigator of a sailboat on the open seas. While the captain and crew might have a destination in mind, the path taken toward that destination does not take a straight line. It requires tacking, in response to the winds and the currents; therefore the ship moves toward its missional destination along a path that looks like it is going in the wrong direction. This requires seeing “the

²² On the differences between technical and adaptive challenges, see Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994); Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002); Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

invisible in the visible.” On the surface, it looks like the leader is guiding the church in the wrong direction, but beneath the surface something beautiful is going on. In this role as a navigator, the leader knows that there are an infinite number of courses to take and each is unique to each trip, not just to each ship. No two voyages will be the same, even if they begin at the same starting point and aim at the same destination.

Second, navigating adaptive waters requires a sailing vessel that is appropriate for the journey. Imagine the church as it has been developed in the West—what Flett refers to a “church as culture”—is like a motorized yacht made for trolling the shallow waters along the shore. Shifting to sailing on the open seas calls for “remodeling a ship while sailing it.”²³ This image was first proposed by Otto Neurath as a way of imagining how knowledge is reconstructed. He wrote, “We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.”²⁴ Pastors do not have the opportunity to take their ship (the church) into a dry dock so that it can be remodeled to be a “community-in-mission” as introduced in the previous chapter. The imagination that one has about the church cannot be set on the shelf to be replaced by new ones. The boat must be reconstructed on the way. Therefore, leadership is about being a navigator of a ship that is being remodeled by the crew while it is sailing.

²³ Jenson, 2: 65.

²⁴ Otto Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973), 198.

This is done as a Pilgrimage, not as a set of decisions made according to a strategic plan. While the course is navigated, the plan for the church comes into focus. It is discovered on the Pilgrimage. In the business leadership book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes about companies that stand out and what they do that is different than those that are average. He and his team of researchers discovered that great companies practice patterns that result in the “flywheel effect.” These businesses are not great because they found an ideal strategy, experienced a miracle moment, or the leader rallied the troops. Instead, there was a deliberate process akin to trying to rotate a three-story flywheel by hand. At first, progress is slow, even unnoticed, but by continually pushing the flywheel, eventually it rotates and picks up speed. He found that companies that do not break through operate in just the opposite fashion. Collins writes,

They sought the single defining action, the grand program, the one killer innovation, the miracle moment that would allow them to skip the arduous buildup stage and jump right to breakthrough. They would push the flywheel in one direction, then stop, change course, and throw it in a new direction—and then they would stop, change course, and throw it into yet another direction.²⁵

Poetics, Performance, and Practices are the three spokes of the missional church flywheel. The leadership Pilgrimage is about the adoption of specific priorities that have the greatest potential to deliberately, consistently, and persistently push these three spokes toward the missional future.

²⁵ James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap--and Others Don't*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 178.

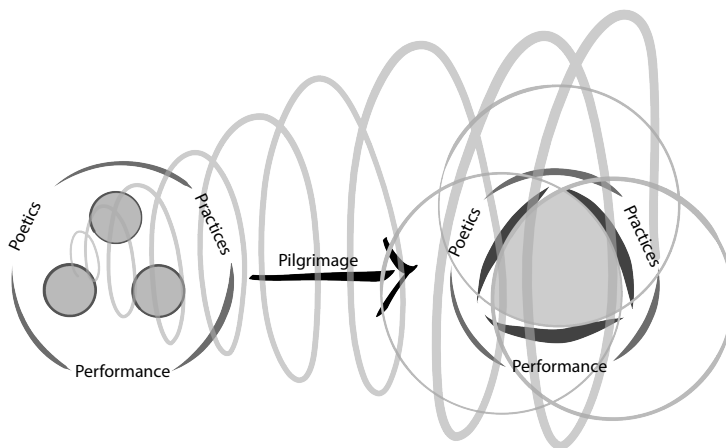


Figure 37: Pilgrimage

The goal is to move the church toward the future on the right. On the left, the forms of Communion, Relating, and Engagement are merely functions of the church programs. They are not operating as a manifestation of the missional ontology of the church, as they are on the right. The pushing of the Poetics, Performance, and Practices empowers the leaders to navigate the waters and equips God's people to rebuild the ship. The question then of how a leader guides a church in this Pilgrimage is appropriate at this point. In most cases, how questions are viewed as ultimate, which usually means that pastoral leaders begin and end with the search for pragmatic answers. Now that the nature of God's beauty has been established, the ecclesial aesthetics have been explored, and the leadership roles identified, the questions of how can be explored.

A Proposal for the Pilgrimage

The exploratory interviews performed as a part of this project revealed that the pastoral leaders were guiding their churches through a Pilgrimage of moving the church from its old state into that of participating in God's mission. However, the interviews only identified hints of what the particular processes may have been. The following offers

an introductory proposal for understanding the Pilgrimage that these and other pastors like them have used for guiding their churches toward missional church. Further research would be required to name the exact nature of their Pilgrimage and how they are related to and influenced by theological aesthetics.

What emerged from the research is the fact that in order for the missional church to be perceived as appealing and attractive, the Pilgrimage for leading a church into God's mission must be clearly stated. People need to see the first steps toward a new future or they will not perceive the journey as being worth the risk. There are two things that make the talk about any kind of Pilgrimage a challenge. First, the Pilgrimage is often viewed through the lens of strategic planning. The end goal is a fixed vision, a strategy is developed to move toward that vision, and then resources are allocated toward that strategy. Such an approach assumes that leading a church into a missional future is a technical challenge that can merely be defined by the categories of truth and goodness. Within this perspective, the path toward the future is under the control of human agency. However, the reality of adaptive challenges as it relates to the future of the church and the introduction of beauty into the conversation requires something other than strategical planning.

The second challenge is observed within the thought leaders and pastoral pioneers who have adopted the view of missional church as "participating in God's mission." This theological perspective creates an imagination to recognize that the Pilgrimage is an adaptive challenge. Therefore, the option of simply developing some kind of straightforward step-by-step process is eliminated.²⁶ When one looks at the magnitude of

²⁶ I have learned much from the processes developed by missional thought leaders Pat Keifert and Alan Roxburgh. Both of their processes recognize the complex, adaptive challenges that are inherent to

what it means to be missional, it can feel like trying to swallow a watermelon in one bite. As a result, pastoral leaders who do not have the time or energy to commit to an extensive change Pilgrimage that will address the adaptive challenges they face actually opt for so-called “missional” formulas that are overly simplistic and do not result in any real change.

The following proposes a Pilgrimage that is based in theological aesthetics, recognizes the reality of the adaptive challenges churches face, and makes the journey doable by breaking the watermelon into smaller chunks. The aim is to offer a leader a sense of confidence that the vision for “participating in God’s mission” is doable while providing tools so that others will come along for the ride.

There are two parts to this Pilgrimage. First, there is the recognition of three paths within a congregation, each requiring different strategies for moving the church through adaptive challenges. The second part offers eight Pilgrimage priorities needed to lead these three sets of relationships through the Pilgrimage.

Three Relational Paths

There are three sets of relationships within the church that are each moving along three parallel paths toward the *telos* of *missio Dei*. The purpose of these paths is to facilitate different capacities to perceive the beauty of the *missio Dei*. Drawing from innovation research that has shown that different people perceive the value of an innovation at differing rates, these three paths provide concrete direction for working with the three primary groups within a congregation who typically view innovations

leading a church into *telos* of missional church. See Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*; Roxburgh and Boren.

differently. The pastor, then, does not push the flywheel of Poetics, Performance, and Practices in the same way for everyone in the church.²⁷ The following diagram illustrates these three paths.

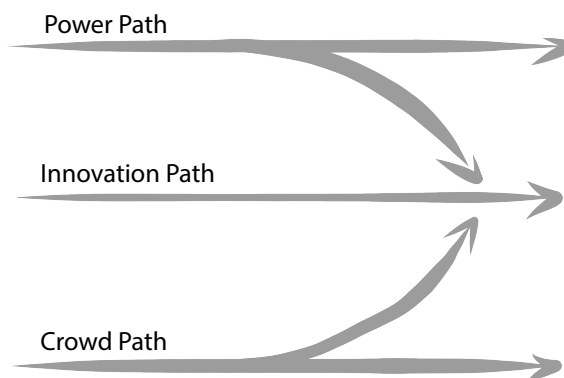


Figure 38: Three Paths of Perception

Innovation Path

First, consider the center path where innovation relationships emerge. Those involved at this level are leading the innovation of moving missional church from a teaching to a lived theology. This begins with a small group of people who are more readily open to perceiving God’s missional nature. The lens of aesthetics is helpful in understanding the growth of an innovation because the perception of the beauty of an innovation is not passed from one to the masses. Propositions of truth and even the virtues of goodness can be taught to crowds, however the beauty of the kingdom can only

²⁷ While I developed this model of three paths independently, the work of John Kotter on the way that companies adapt, innovate, and evolve has led him to propose a dual-track model, one where the standard hierarchical system of a company moves on an incremental path (what I am calling Crowd Path) while the innovation is “accelerated” through a network of informal experiments (what I am calling Innovation Path). He writes, “The hierarchy part of the dual operating system differs from almost every other hierarchy today in one very important way. Much of the work ordinarily assigned to it that demands innovation, agility, difficult change, and big strategic initiatives executed quickly . . . has been shifted over to the network part. That leaves the hierarchy less encumbered and better able to perform what it is designed for,” John P. Kotter, *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster Moving World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014), 21.

be imparted incrementally through relationships. This can be observed in the life of Jesus as he disseminated the kingdom through dialogue, demonstration, and practice. Jesus did not come with a fixed program or a systematic agenda that could be replicated by the crowds as if the gospel is merely a franchise to be multiplied. He came to emanate the life of God in a way that reflected who God is. Since the cross reveals the relational, dialogical nature of God, the beauty of God can only be received, embodied, and passed on in the same manner. It disseminates through conversations and emerges in contexts.

Beauty diffuses through the adoption of a few who pass it along to a few more, ultimately leading to gradual growth. The diffusion of an innovation progresses according to the pattern of 3:12:70:120. The beauty of *missio Dei* will not be perceived by the masses initially. In fact, the masses might very well be repulsed by it because they do not have the capacity to rightly see what God is doing. Instead, God's beauty emerges relationally through a very small group who pass it along to ten or twelve, who then are able to incorporate fifty to seventy.²⁸

Crowd Path

The Crowd Path aims at preparing people who do not yet have the capacity to perceive the beauty of *missio Dei*. While they might consent to the truth of *missio Dei*, they are not yet ready to move into missional experiments at the present. Consider the

²⁸ This topic deserves extensive development from four different aspects. The first is that of the science of proxemics and how God works through the natural social groupings that are woven into creation. See Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990). Second, the nature of innovation diffusion works along this kind of organic expansion. See Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008). The third aspect addresses the question of the way that Jesus developed people along these lines and what that might mean in today's context without turning it into a reprimination strategy. See William A Beckham, *70: Jesus' Expansion Strategy* (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2013). The fourth aspect pertains to actual disciplines that are needed for facilitate such an experimental process. On experimentation, see Zscheile.

adoption bell curve introduced in chapter three. Those in categories further to the right require more time to see the value of an innovation. Middle adopters, which comprise the vast majority of any congregation need to see an experiment in action before they can perceive its value. Innovators and early adopters are those who enjoy the experimentation done on the Innovation Path. The Crowd Path is about creating a safe place to prepare the majority to perceive what God is doing, while allowing them to observe that which is going on in the experiments.

As the Innovation Path develops in the numerical progression of 3:12:70:120, those who develop “eyes to see” can shift from the Crowd Path to the Innovation Path. The pastoral leaders who play the role of a Navigation Guide provide lanes that facilitate this shift. While the innovators and early adopters have the creativity to start experiments without much direction or administration, middle adopters require greater clarity and support in order to understand what it means to join the Innovation Path.

Power Path

The Power Path is based on the recognition that those who possess the influence and/or hold positions of power, in most cases, are not inclined to be a part of the early stages of innovation development. However, when an innovation is introduced into a church system, two common strategies are most often taken. On the one hand, pastors assume that the established leaders must be the ones who initiate and develop the experiments. This actually stalls the innovation because those who hold positions of authority within a local church usually fall in the middle adopter categories. Their strengths promote the administering and maintaining the kind of church as it is known. They do not, by nature, think creatively, and when they are forced to do so they often

respond with passive-aggressive resistance. On the other hand, some pastors eschew the maintainers of the status quo and emphasize the work of the innovators. This means that the experiments must be done in isolation from those who have the ability to carry an innovation out over the long-haul. Innovators and early adopters are great at getting things started, but the diffusion of an innovation depends upon the eventual inclusion of middle adopters who have the ability to sustain it.

As a result, there is often a systemic, political divide between those who are prone to experiment and those who are wired for maintenance. Instead, navigation guides empower those who enjoy experimentation while at the same time promoting open communication with the middle adopters who hold the positions of power. As experiments progress, there must be an ongoing communication so that the stakeholders in a congregation grow in their perception of what the Spirit is doing through the innovation.²⁹ Even more, in order for the innovation to take hold, the stakeholders must come to the place of perceiving its beauty and eventually becoming a part of it. The culture of a church will not shift into a lived theology of mission church only through the experiments by innovators on the fringe. Cultural change correlates with change in institutional power. Rather than disparaging this reality according to an antagonistic script, it is crucial to understand that God created different types of people in order to work in different ways. The role of people in power who are middle adopters may not cut

²⁹ A strategy for this is introduced in Roxburgh and Boren, 171-79.

new paths for the future of the church, but fringe experiments will not become innovations that diffuse through the church without them.³⁰

The goal is to empower those who are prone to innovate while working with the administrators and stakeholders, not against them. After the experiments have gained momentum, those with administrative control can begin to participate.

Eight Navigation Priorities

The second part of the Pilgrimage is a series of “priorities” that break up the proverbial movement toward the missional church “watermelon” into eight pieces.³¹ Like a lever that can move an object with minimal force, priorities are doable, focused actions that results in an impact that is much greater than the efforts invested in the priorities. This is due to the fact that the priorities are specific ways of participating in God’s beauty, thereby serving as a means for joining in the emanation and remanation of God’s beauty by the Spirit.

A few preliminary observations will help clarify the way that the priorities work. First, there is some degree of overlap between the priorities and the practices that a church might adopt. The distinction that I am making here is that the priorities are specific ways to increase the perception and expression of *missio Dei* as a corporate entity in a strategic way. These are leadership priorities that may or may not be overtly

³⁰ On the role of power and culture change see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33-45.

³¹ I began developing a process for leading the church into a new future in 1999 as I performed case study research on how pastors led their churches from a traditional attractional, programmatic model to an organic small-group/missional community model. The first change process that I developed treated the challenge as technical in nature. I have since adapted that approach to embrace the adaptive challenges involved in guiding a church through the change process. This technique-driven process is proposed in M. Scott Boren, *Making Cell Groups Work: Navigating the Transformation to the Cell-Based Church* (Houston, TX: TOUCH Publications, 2003).

communicated with the church at large. In many cases, these are hidden or underlying patterns of life that will shape the work of leaders that the congregation as a whole will take for granted. Those on the three paths will adopt practices that are crucial to these priorities, but most will not understand the way that these priorities are shaping the Pilgrimage that is so crucial to the work of leadership.

Second, they are not linear steps that must be taken in a specific order. Neither do they have a point of beginning and ending. Instead they are priorities that are adopted and sustained in order to push the flywheel of Poetics, Performance, and Practices in an ongoing basis. They are the means by which the flywheel is pushed. The order of adoption might very well move from left to right through the diagram below.

Third, the priorities are not so distinct from each other that they operate as if they are independent categories; instead they bleed into one another. The actual identification of them is somewhat artificial because an experienced navigator will get to the point of moving between them without overtly choosing to do so. However, distinction between the priorities aids novice leaders in the Pilgrimage of moving people along the three paths. While an image can never capture the organic way these eight priorities work in real life, we might imagine them working together in this way:

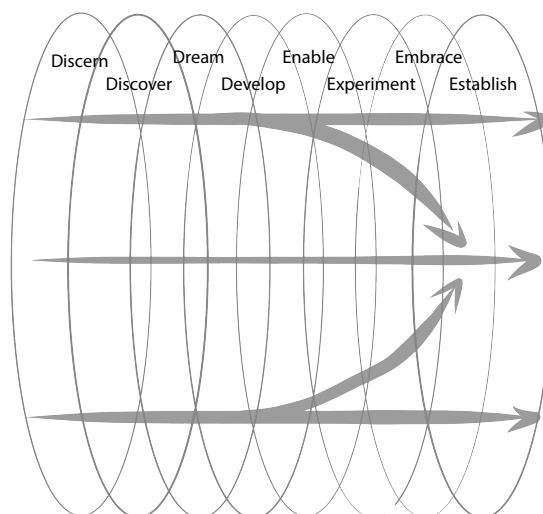


Figure 39: Navigation Priorities

A fourth observation is about how these priorities relate to aesthetics. The first four (those that start with the letter D) aim to develop the perception of God’s beauty, as they are primarily focused on making space for the *capax Dei* within the life of the congregation to see and hear what God is doing and what God wants to do. The last four (those that begin with the letter E) focus on expressing God’s beauty as a corporate entity. The following offers a brief introduction to the perception and expression of God’s beauty.

Priorities for Perceiving God’s Beauty

Discern Reality—Divine beauty that is defined by the revelation of the cross emerges in the midst of the real. It is not a pristine ecclesial idealism that gives permission to the church to ignore the hard facts of what is transpiring in life. This priority requires leaders to listen deeply to the locus of God’s continuing cruciform work at the three corners of the Gospel, Church, Context triangle.³² The goal of this priority is

³² On listening, see Moynagh, *Church in Life: Emergence, Ecclesiology and Entrepreneurship*, 320-25.

two-fold. First, developing an awareness of reality will create a sense of urgency that is required to endure the uncertainty and even pain when moving out of the known experience of the church. Second, it shifts the focus away from trying to fix the church. The deep listening that is practiced through discerning reality forces people to enter into dialogue about the Scriptures, about the state of the church, and about the reality of life in the local context, which, in turn, undermines the lie that the Pilgrimage is primarily focused on how to make the church work again.³³

Discover the Sense-Making Team—This priority empowers pastoral leaders to embrace the shift from hero to host as it undermines the myth of the change leader as an isolated expert. The future of the church will be discovered together as communities participate in the communal dance of the Trinity. This requires that leaders develop a team that can “get on the balcony”³⁴ and work together to make sense of what is happening on the dance floor of the church and context. This team is comprised of three to seven people who guide the journey and serve as midwives to change.³⁵

Getting on the balcony is a word picture about leadership that speaks to the movement between leading on the dance floor of getting things done and moving up to the balcony in order to view the dance from a different perspective. Heifetz and Linsky refer to the Jesuit practice of “contemplation in action.”³⁶ They write: “Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only

³³ Holt.

³⁴ *Leadership on the Line*, 51ff.

³⁵ On a sense-making team, Moynagh, *Church in Life: Emergence, Ecclesiology and Entrepreneurship*, 333-53.

³⁶ Heifetz and Linsky, 51.

for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray.”³⁷ Although Heifetz and Linsky do not make the connection, this practice has a direct relationship to aesthetics. In order to see that which is evocative, that which cannot be fully explained by statistics, annual reports, and productivity charts, one must step back to see underlying themes, listen to what is not being said, and pay attention non-verbal responses. They do make a loose connection when they write, “Leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted. To be effective you must respond to what is happening.”³⁸

Dream a Future—The future toward which a church is moving will be influenced by the imagination that the people possess of that future. The default imagination will almost always be that of returning to some point of the past glory of the church because the historical experience makes the most vivid contribution to what is perceived about the church. In order to imagine an alternative future, an equally vivid and compelling dream must influence the conversation. This leadership priority is about the development of a description of a dream, not merely a vision statement that actually does not have much to do with the imagination. A dream description is a document that paints a picture of the Poetics, Performance, and Practices that portray a new imagination of what the church can be. Pastor Exurban has emphasized this level in his leadership. He adapted Will Mancini’s practical process of developing a vision, found in *God Dreams*, and revised it

³⁷ Ibid., 53.

³⁸ Ibid., 73.

to fit a “participating in God’s mission” paradigm. This resulted in a “God Dream” document that paints a concrete picture of the church’s future, one that can be communicated by any person in the church.³⁹ Pastor University, led her congregation through a church discernment over a period of three years and developed a similar document that outlines the calling of her church. What became evident in the research is the fact that this God dream is not something that a pastor develops in isolation and then proclaims to others. It is crafted through conversations and named through a process of recognizing the dream that emerges in the community. The exact nature of such process is far beyond what can be explored at this point. Leaders create an environment where God’s people can dream of a future and communicate the possibilities that something can be different.

Develop the Systems—The church is comprised of that which is visible and that which cannot be seen on the surface. Of course, there are overt visible strategies that must be adopted to move the church forward; however, the hidden systems—which also might be described as the politics or way of life of the church—actually impact the way forward as much, if not more, than any visible strategy that a church enacts.⁴⁰ This

³⁹ For an explanation about how vision works with this paradigm see Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*, 95-115. There are many concerns about taking Mancini’s vision process at face value because he operates from a theological imagination of human agency, not one that is shaped by the beauty of God’s cruciform agency in the world. Therefore, his specific process is only helpful after massive reformulation, from my point of view. See Mancini and Bird.

⁴⁰ While the language of “veiled form” (Newbigin), “invisible in the visible” (Milbank), and “beneath the surface” (Boyd) might at first look like an esoteric theology that has no practical import, its reality is exhibited daily in the life of every church. The progress or the lack thereof in whatever strategy that a specific congregation adopts is only partially dependent upon the visible or surface-level strategy implementation. Most of the time, that which undermines the movement of a church toward at goal is the repulsive that lies beneath the surface, not the specific strategy or the ability of those involved to follow the instructions of that strategy. Here are some examples of what I’ve seen over the years:

- A key volunteer leader goes through an emotional crisis, lashes out at church leadership, leaves the church and then starts spreading rumors about the pastor—all of which are untrue—resulting in others leaving the church.

priority forces leaders to see the hidden ways that the church operates in order to identify and to address unspoken attitudes, assumed power structures, and insider patterns that have become so much a part of the church that no one can see them any longer.⁴¹

Priorities for Expressing God's Beauty

Enable Action—The point of this priority is to provide short-term doable actions that are low cost, but they make space for the generation of short-term wins.⁴² This “gives the work back to the people”⁴³ and allows them to learn on the way. In most cases, these actions come in the form of formulaic programs that address technical challenges to

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- A leader who has invested much energy in the development of a new strategy gets sick and has to take a leave from her role, and therefore the change initiative loses momentum.
 - The leadership of the church gets impatient and launches the initiative to a large group of people, 90% of which don't understand what it means, even though they give verbal ascent to it.
 - A financial crisis hits the city and giving takes a hit. The eldership shifts to survival mode and lays off the person leading the change initiative.
 - The senior pastor has a different vision from the person leading the change initiative. For instance, this most often takes the form of the senior pastor only has a vision for preaching and worship, and he does not have a heart for engaging the neighborhood outside the church building.
 - The senior pastor is exhausted from performing all that is required of him to fulfill his traditional role as a pastor.
 - A staff pastor who is not able to do his or her job effectively.
 - The primary volunteers of the church are burned out from their work.
 - A staff pastor gets caught in a sexual scandal.
 - The staff pastor who is leading the initiative into missional community gets his job description changed to oversee the family ministry.
 - The senior pastor takes role at another church.

These are examples of beneath the surface ideologies that shape the politics of church life. All of them point to deep, often ignored, patterns of life that are inherent to the day-in/day-out the way the church does things. Adopting a new missional strategy might address some surface-level strategies, but they fail to address the repulsive patterns that will undermine that strategy unless they are addressed. As a result, any new strategy becomes an “empty signifier,” a slogan or a banner that the church leadership waves before the church for six months to two years that seems to give hope for a future, but nothing really changes. Then after the energy dies down, a new strategy is adopted to provide a fresh round of hope.

⁴¹ See Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (New York: Currency, Doubleday, 1994); *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Rev. and updated. ed. (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 2006).

⁴² John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 117.

⁴³ Heifetz and Linsky, 51.

subvert the common expectations people have about what the church is. The journey toward the future will be discovered indirectly through subversive actions. Instead of verbal, direct attack through the confrontation that which stands against God's mission, this priority empowers leaders to undermine the expectations that people have about the church by using technical solutions to stir up a hunger for that which cannot be addressed through technical solutions. This goal of this priority is to meet people where they are—a form of “cruciform accommodation”—while at the same time preparing them to perceive the need for more.⁴⁴

Experiment on the Fringes—Leaders who embrace this priority make space for addressing adaptive challenges by facilitating missional experiments. These are not generated from the center of leadership control of the church but from the fringes where creative people can tap into their desires and explore where God is at work in the world in unexpected, contextual ways. As a part of the Innovation Path, small segments of those who are ready to venture into the creative narration of a new story will experiment with new forms of life together.⁴⁵ However, other creative experiments will emerge as serendipities. Part of the role of the pastor as navigator is to pay attention to the unexpected missional experiences that arise.

Experimentation relates to the adaptive leadership principle of giving the work back to the people. The pastoral leader is not the one who does the work of innovating. That which is being introduced into a system will only be adopted to the degree that the

⁴⁴ This view of subversive, indirect leadership is based on the wisdom of Eugene Peterson. See *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 27ff.

⁴⁵ This is an adaptation of the Missional Change Model developed by Alan Roxburgh. See *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2006), 79ff.

individuals within the system enter into its imagination. Just as the role of an art teacher is to let their students play with their art, even to the point of producing some very poor pieces, so must the leader allow others to learn on the job. This calls for experiments so that we can discover our way into the innovation, doing so at a rate that fits the “range of distress” appropriate to the system in which the innovation is being introduced. This is why working with those who are more open to innovations, which means they like to experiment, is so crucial.

Embrace Conflict. The creative expression of beauty will arise through, not around, conflict. The conflict will serve as the means to shape the Poetics, Performance, Practices, leading the church into a form of death and into a new life. Learning the mindsets and skills needed to address adaptive challenges that are related to innovation adoption as individuals and as a church system requires the movement of established boundaries that have been formed by previous ways of doing church. This will result in conflict, both within the souls of individuals and within inter-personal relationships. Old ways have become fixed patterns with which people are comfortable. Conflict produces stress and energy and the natural response to such this stress is fight or flight. If the level of conflict rises too high, the knee-jerk reaction will be to do everything possible to get back to one’s comfort zone. We might illustrate it this way:⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Alan J. Roxburgh, "Church Conflict," (2008).

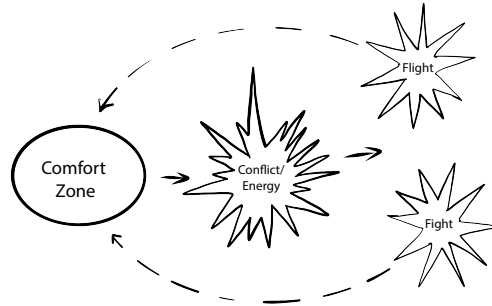


Figure 40: Fight or Flight

The goal is to engage the conflict in such a way that individuals and groups do not retreat back into their old comfort zone, but instead they use the pressure that has been developed to move them into a new way of seeing things. Again, the aesthetic word picture of “seeing” enters into the conversation. The stress that arises through conflict can be used to generate a new imagination so that people can enter into the innovation, which goes far beyond a simple intellectual understanding of what the innovation is. This creates an expanded comfort zone.⁴⁷

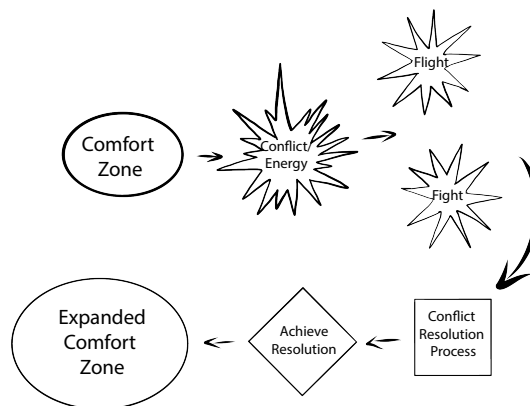


Figure 41: Expanded Comfort Zone

One of the crucial skills of this priority is that of controlling the level of conflict so that the team is not over-stressed or under-stressed. Too much conflict causes people

⁴⁷ An expanded version of this is developed in Boren, *Leading Small Groups in the Way of Jesus*, 172-77.

to enter a zone where they freeze up because they have gone beyond their “limit of tolerance.” Too little conflict goes below the “threshold of learning.”⁴⁸

Establish a New Imagination— The future church will be developed by plodders not those who promote the spectacular. God’s new missional imagination is cultivated through being hospitable, suffering with the community, and practicing non-violence as a means for the common good. Pastor University shared how she has been serving as the rector for twelve years. In the beginning, people spoke of all the activities they were doing to help those in need and address social issues. Now those same people are speaking about the Spirit’s work in their lives and in their relationships. It has taken time to address the same issues repeatedly in order to help people reframe their imaginations.

People need time to move through the innovation-diffusion process. One could illustrate it this way: If a pastor works on a doctoral degree for four or five years, reading 20,000 pages of literature, researching churches, and writing a 200-page dissertation on the topic in order to lead others toward the missional church, we must ask how this doctoral process shaped the imagination of the pastor. Then we must ask what kind of time, experiences, and information is needed for others, who are not paid to lead a church, to come anywhere close to the imagination developed by the pastor who went through that process? A leader who sees the new way and is convinced of its truth, goodness, and beauty to such a degree that she will dedicate the rest of her ministry to it will find that many, if not most, of those whom she leads do not agree with her perspective. And simply stating her argument will not change their minds. Part of the

⁴⁸ Heifetz and Linsky, 108.

deep conviction that has led to her adoption of the innovation includes the resolve to stay committed to the innovation when others cannot see it and even resist it.

Summary of Pilgrimage

The Pilgrimage of leading a local congregation toward the *telos* of beauty must be defined by that beauty. The three paths and the eight priorities propose a way forward that is shaped by God's cruciform beauty. It is a way to allow the revelation of God's cruciform beauty to define the way that the church leads.

Conclusion

To generate the Poetics of missional beauty, pastors shift from the role of a teacher to that of a poet. To foster Performance, they move from being a hero to that of a host. To promote Practices, they adopt the role of spiritual director as opposed to that of a program manager. These three shifts of roles correspond with the lenses that shaped the research. With the emerging role of a navigation guide, additional questions related to the Pilgrimage of God's beauty and the shape of the Pilgrimage of moving into the experience of a missional church ontology must be addressed. More specifically this raises two questions, What is the theological aesthetics of divine pilgrimage? and What is the theological aesthetics of missional church pilgrimage? The practical insight of leadership pilgrimage points back to new questions about God and church.

EPILOGUE

Theological aesthetics has opened new ways to express and perceive the gift of *missio Dei*, missional church, and missional leadership. *Theological aesthetics provides a framework to perceive that God's missional expression flows out of who God is, while at the same time naming the reality that the way that the church perceives God will be limited by its experience of mission.* It is about the beauty of God's expression and the ability of the church to rightly perceive and be drawn into this beauty. These observations by Pseudo-Dionysius are helpful:

The divine intelligences are said to move as follows. First they move in a circle while they are at one with those illuminations which, without beginning and without end, emerge from the Good and the Beautiful. Then they move in a straight line when, out of Providence, they come to offer unerring guidance to all those below them. Finally, they move in a spiral, for even while they are providing for those beneath them they continue to remain what they are and they turn unceasingly around the Beautiful and the Good from which all identity comes.¹

These three movements summarize the Poetics, Performance, Practices, and Pilgrimage of theological aesthetics proposed in this project. The first movement is that of a Poetic circle, the eternal circle that has forever been and forever will be. It is the definitive statement by John, "God is love," which is demonstrated by the cross. This is the Poetic nature of the beauty that is shared between the Father-Son-Spirit that cannot be broken, as the extreme love expressed on the cross when Jesus became what he is not,

¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 78.

taking on the appearance of one who is full of sin and is therefore cursed, demonstrates the infinite love shared in the circular movement of the Trinity. The cross demonstrates the infinite love beyond which the Son could not have gone, thereby defining the largeness of the infinite distance that the Father-Son-Spirit extend to one another to live in unity with each other. The movement of the circle is not a movement of sameness. It is a movement of other-oriented love of different reaching out to different, thereby defining unity in terms of love, not uniformity. Therefore, the beauty generated by the circular movement of one to another to cross the infinite distances toward each other is a movement that generates so much beauty that it spills out, leading to the second movement.

The cross reveals the second movement of God, which is the line of God's Performance in his incarnational descent. Beauty is such that it shines out from its circle, extending out from itself. Like a light that is complete in its source, it effulgently moves out toward that which it is not. The circle is complete in itself, but it is so complete in its beauty that it has infinite beauty to give the other. The cross is the absolute expression of just how far this beauty extends. The movement of the line from the circle is a movement that overflows out of the completeness of the circle, while not actually depleting the perfection of that circle. Divine beauty does not depend upon others seeing or interacting with that beauty. However, the cross demonstrates that this beauty that defines the circle is not pristine, untouched beauty. The beauty of the circle is not a porcelain doll put away in a China cabinet. This beauty is such that it gives away itself to the extent of fully entering into what it is not; it enters into the "pit of despair" while not losing its beauty

because its beauty is defined by the love that causes Christ to go into the pit in the first place.

The third movement of beauty is that of an ascending spiral of Practices. This movement, as defined by the cross, reveals how all has been completed, all has already been fulfilled for all creation by Christ. Christ is the faithful covenant partner who has received the beauty in fullness and responded with beauty in our stead. This is a movement that comes into the present from the future via the Spirit, as we live in a time when the beauty of God has been fully culminated, but it has not yet been fully manifest. God's promised *telos* folds back on our life now and moves us into the practicing ascent into the life of God. This is about practicing love, as participants in the divine nature, with the Father-Son-Spirit, which means there is a mystical element that requires the church to think beyond the bounds of Enlightenment-defined physicality.

The spiraling movement of God also speaks to the Pilgrimage of how God leads the church into the future. Similar to the image of a hermeneutical spiral, the church perceives the expression of God's beauty and it spirals forward through new understandings of Poetics, Performances, and Practices. The spiral speaks to the fact that the movement toward the future is not linear but neither is it circular. The Pilgrimage spirals toward God's *telos* in such a way that the Spirit incorporates our preconceived notions and experiences of God's mission—even if they are misguided or partial—and draws them into the life and work of the Trinity, leading to the manifest recapitulation of all things. An image that pulls together the various parts that have been explored in this thesis might look like this:

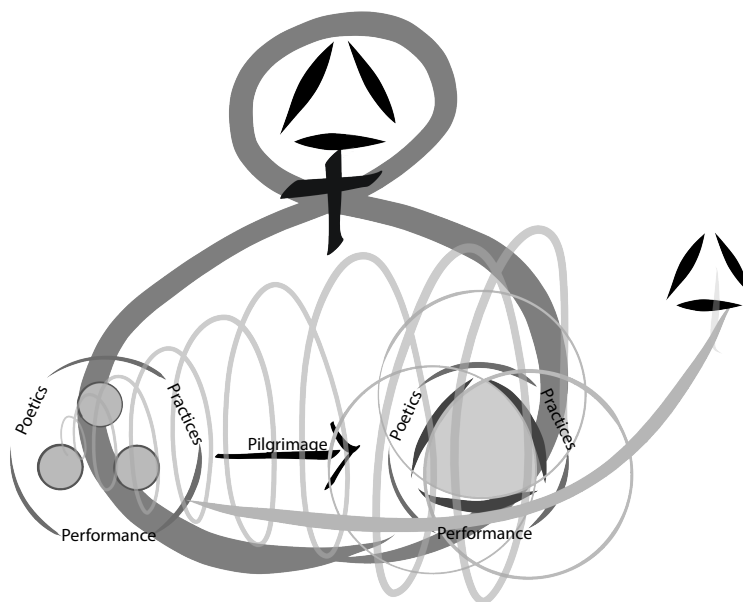


Figure 42: Movements of Beauty

The movements of beauty—its Poetics, Performance, Practices, and Pilgrimage—are too good to be merely true, which in turn makes a space for a church that is too good to be merely true. Too often, the church has sought to only be true enough (reasonable) and good enough (useful) in order to advance as an organizational. The beauty of God makes the mission desirable, compelling, evocative, living, and ultimately triune. The beauty of God is the dance that draws all into God’s life, transforming stumbling missteps into rhythms of cross-like love.

This view of theological aesthetics offers a paradigm that integrates four disciplines of study and ministry that have shaped my journey as a Christian leader. In 1993, I began working for a church consulting organization that asked adaptive questions about the future of the church in North America and promoted strategies to develop community and missional life through small groups. This resulted in my writing eight books that support the development of missional community. Since 1997, I have been trying to understand the meaning and the lived theology of missional church, as I was a

part of the pastoral team led by Alan Roxburgh when he was on writing team that authored *Missional Church*, and I have either written or served as a ghost writer for resources that represent all five of the different missional church perspectives introduced in chapter two. Since 2005, I have been working with Greg Boyd in multiple capacities, having drafted an introduction to his theology, while at the same time trying to work out the lived theology of his systematic theology. Since 2009, I have been a student of spiritual formation, writing about spiritual disciplines in multiple titles.

Community, missional church, Trinitarian theology, and spiritual formation are four disciplines that have developed as independent, parallel strands. Theological aesthetics has provided a larger paradigm that makes a way for weaving them together as in integrated whole. Practically speaking, this has resulted in three specific outcomes.

First, theological aesthetics has clarified the lived theology of “participating in God’s mission.” As I have observed, while the theology espoused by this view is quite advanced, its practical meaning has not been articulated in a clear and accessible way. While I do not claim that this thesis solves the problem of inaccessibility, it does provide a new set of tools to develop the language of *missio Dei*, missional church, and missional leadership that can be understood by a broader audience.

Second, theological aesthetics connects the theology of Sunday morning—where church leaders claim to depend upon the agency of God in their preaching and the celebration of the Lord’s Table—with the leadership theology of Monday morning—where too often the activities of pastoral leadership have more to do with human technique than divine agency. Divine beauty pertains just as much to church

management, pastoral leadership, and the everyday discipleship as it does to the experience of worship or preaching on a Sunday morning.

The third outcome is related to the second. When I was first exploring vocational ministry, I was told by many experienced pastors that if I could do any other job, then I should do it. They communicated that pastoral leadership is hard work that few want and that deep down they had lost their desire to actually do it. I began to ask myself why would I ask anyone to follow me as a pastoral leader if, in fact, the way of leadership I was performing was not something that others would view as desirable. My experience as a pastor and my observations as a consultant led me to conclude that much of the reason for this experience of pastoral leadership is related to the fact that the most effective way to lead the church is actually repulsive and even violent. Pastoral leaders are celebrated for the results they produce, however, my conversations with them have caused me to question whether their lives and their leadership are actually compelling or evocative. They work 60-80 hours per week, do not have time for their families, and are consumed with the pressure to make the church work. In addition, their perception of what it means to be a missional church actually adds to that pressure. The movement toward missional church depends not upon the success of the church nor the success of its leaders, but upon the church and its leaders' capacity to participate in the *telos* of beauty. This fosters a way of leadership that is in and of itself beautiful, the kind of leadership that is evocative. In this way, the church knows ultimate beauty, which the sign, witness, and foretaste of the beauty that redeems all.

This is the end.

APPENDIX A

PHONE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please describe your congregation and the local context in which your church is set.
2. Tell me a little about how the theology of the Trinity has influenced your ministry.
3. When you talk about missional church with your key leaders, what kind of language do you use?
4. What has worked most effectively in communicating your theology of the church? What has not worked?
5. How do you talk about the role of the Trinity as it relates to church and mission?
6. What role has dialogue played in the communication process? How has this dialogue—specifically feedback of leaders—generated new perspectives for your views on the missional church?
7. What practices have you adopted with your leaders to help them understand God's mission?
8. Where had there been conflict with regard to sharing the idea of missional church? Talk about what developed from that conflict.
9. What kind of resources have you used to help leaders understand the missional church?
10. What else do you think is important for me to know as I move forward in this research?

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

God's Beautiful Mission

You are invited to be in a research study of pastors who have been equipped in missional church as triune participation are communicating this perspective to local church leaders. You were selected as a possible participant because of your church's movement toward this perspective of missional church. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: M. Scott Boren. This study is being conducted by me as part of my doctoral thesis in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisors are Dan Anderson and Alvin Luedke.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand the communication patterns used by pastors to translate the idea of missional church to core leaders in local congregations.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: Participate in a one-hour Skype interview.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study presents no anticipated risks to the research subjects.

In the event that this research activity results in an injury, treatment will be available, including first aid, emergency treatment, counseling, and follow-up care as needed, however, payment for any such treatments must be provided by you or your third-party player.

There are no direct benefits from participating in this interview.

Indirect benefits to yourself/or the general public of participation may include an increased understanding of the nature of and the practical implications of the missional church for your local congregation. You may also increase your understanding of how other leaders perceive what God is doing in your church.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept on my password protected computer; only my advisors, Dan Anderson and Alvin Luedke, a transcriber, and I will have access to the data and any tape recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

I will be recording the audio of our interviews, which will be destroyed by May 2021. If anyone besides me will have access to the raw data, you will be identified.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is M. Scott Boren. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me/us at

Phone:

Advisors: Dan Anderson, ...

Alvin Luedke, ...

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

I consent to be audiotaped:

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

Created 09/30/16

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